and the waxen wings of ambition melt

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/55593034.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Masters of the Air (TV 2024)

Relationship:
Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Characters:
John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Gale "Buck" Cleven, Curtis Biddick, Marjorie "Marge" Spencer, Bernard "Benny" DeMarco, 100th Bomb Group Members (Masters of the Air)

Additional Tags:
Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Getting Together, Angst with a Happy Ending, Hurt/Comfort, Canonical Character Death, Character Study, No cheating, Episode Related, Slow Dancing, invented my own lore, Men Crying, Pining, Feelings Realization, First Kiss, Oral Sex, Dirty Talk, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Devotion, they might be a little codependent, Slight possessive behavior, Touching, Lots of it

Language:
English

Series:
Part 2 of The MOTA Files (unrelated)

Stats:
Published: 2024-05-02 Words: 26,779 Chapters: 1/1

and the waxen wings of ambition melt

by MarionetteFtHJM

Summary

"So you're Buck and he's Bucky?"

"Right you are!" Bucky gloats, eyes alight with mirth. "Been that way since the very beginning!"

"That's what he'd like you to think." He snorts, kicking John under the table, catching the toe of his boot.

Much as John would like to cite it as such, that's not really the truth.

No, Gale "Buck" Cleven hadn't always gotten along with one John "Bucky" Egan. Not like he does now, not even remotely. These days, you're more likely to find them together than not, but back at the very beginning, it wasn't like that at all.

(All the things that flying too close to the sun entails)

Translation into Russian available here!

Notes

Once again, based solely on the apple tv show MoTA and no relation to the real people the show was inspired by!
I have returned with another mota fic which is basically the spiritual twin to my first one but different! I shifted some things around, played w the dialogue of the first 4 eps and added my own spin on things as always.
ALSO I realized halfway through this that Curt was probably already there by the time Buck showed up so just pretend they've been besties since pilot training its fine. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: И тают восковые крылья амбиций by Linda_0210

The question out of Marge's friend's mouth is one that they've heard countless times before, loud between them despite the jovial atmosphere of the bar. This particular question has been repeated by men, women, COs and children alike and yet, John never seems to grow tired of it.

"So you're *Buck* and he's *Bucky*?"

"Right you are!" Bucky gloats, eyes alight with mirth. "Been that way since the very beginning!"

"That's what he'd like you to think." He snorts, kicking John under the table, catching the toe of his boot.

Much as John would like to cite it as such, that's not really the truth.

No, Gale "Buck" Cleven hadn't always gotten along with one John "Bucky" Egan. Not like he does now, not even remotely. These days, you're more likely to find them together than not, but back at the very beginning, it wasn't like that at all.

As a matter of fact, Gale distinctly remembers his first thought upon meeting the other man being *he's loud.* It wasn't necessarily a *negative* observation, but it had been there at the forefront of his mind.

John was, *is,* older than him and at the time, Buck hadn't really been accustomed to people with so much *shine* to them. He'd come to basic gangly and sheepish, more used to horses than other people – especially men around his age that were brought up in more populated areas of their beloved country – and was taken aback by the sheer variety amongst them all. Men, *boys* really, like John Egan who wanted to be heard, who were unapologetic in their attention seeking, were a novelty to him.

Annoying, was another thought that he'd had. This one, admittedly, wasn't as kindly neutral as the first.

Because John Egan – not yet *Major*, not yet *Bucky* to Gale either – cloud yap for hours about nothing at all, could spin a tall tale on anyone's account, could possibly lead a horse to water *and* make it drink. It was obvious that he loved the sound of his own voice, and that he loved letting his laugh carry, unrestrained. He sang when no one asked him to, patted men on the back a little too hard, and more importantly – *wouldn't leave Gale alone.*

Initially, gangly-and-sheepish Gale had kept to himself. He did the drills, tucked his sheet corners in, handled his kit, and ate his food in the mess – *alone*. The others never seemed to pay him much attention and he had liked that despite what they were being taught. Because they were supposed to be a unit, their barracks and their lieutenant, but Gale had been perfectly fine isolating himself within said unit. He would have kept to it, too, if he hadn't acquired a silent shadow over the course of his first week there.

He'd known who it was immediately. Subtlety had never been John's forte and Gale was, in his self-imposed exile, observant. He was aware of *Egan* and when *Egan* became aware of him in turn, it was rather obvious. But, as *unsubtle* as John was, he had also taken his time actually *approaching* Gale. Instead, he hovered in Gale's periphery, somewhere where he could hear the guy, somewhere where if he turned, he'd see a sharp grin directed at the world at large. And when he *did* finally make contact, he did it in the most obnoxious way possible.

A tray had slammed onto the table in front of him while he'd been having breakfast. It had been filled up with whatever was on the menu that day and accompanied by a steaming cup of coffee – a cup of coffee which had promptly been tipped over at the motion and spilled across Gale's own unfinished food. The ensuring silence had been broken only by the din of the hall and then finally by a rushed *sorry*, followed by choked back laughter. Gale hadn't been, and still isn't, a particularly violent man, but in that moment - he could have punched John Egan in his prominent nose.

"He looked like a *Buck* I knew back home," John says easily because the story has dwindled down to those few words over the course of their friendship. And even though Gale huffs and grumbles, he can't say that he's all that displeased about telling it that way anymore. It seemed like that simple sentence was enough for anyone asking – even if what it had been originally rang a little different.

'Gale? Really? Cleven's fine but Gale's an old-man's name. You look like my friend from back home, Buck. I think that'll suit you much better.' And it had been said with enough conviction and within earshot of enough people that it'd sort of just… *stuck.* All of a sudden, he was no longer Gale Cleven, he was *Buck*.

"I think *Gale's* a lovely name," Marge, bless her heart, comes to his defense as if it's her duty to defend his honor.

“Course you do! You have to, you’re basically paid to like it!” John rolls his eyes and Marge swats at him jokingly, making Peggy giggle into John’s shoulder.

“Don’t be mean, Bucky!” John’s date chirps like she has any sway over him and, the gentleman that he is, Bucky lets the lady silence him for a moment – a rare feat, he must really like her.

“I think we need some music.” Marge announces once it’s obvious that the conversation is winding down. The girls hurry off to pick out a song to play while he’s left alone with John who’s – who’s staring at him with a big grin on his face that spells trouble.

“What?” He grunts, averting his eyes and letting them trail down Marge’s form while she sways to the music.

“You always get that look about you whenever anyone asks about it, you know.” John scoots closer to him, keeping their conversation hushed as if they’re sharing some grand secret.

“What look? Seeing things again, are we?”

“Nostalgic, I think. Like you’re rememberin’ it fondly when I know you couldn’t stand my ass for the first two months.” John’s grin drops some, a little more restrained now, not as wide, but still as genuine. It's an exaggeration, Gale wouldn't have lasted that long disliking someone's company.

“And yet, here we are.” He taps his fingers against the cool surface of the table. “Friends.”

“*Best* friends,” John pushes because that’s what he does and Gale nods amicably, not one to deny John much of anything.

“Go dance with the girl, Bucky, who knows when you’ll get the chance to again, stuck in an office all day and night.” He pushes the other’s shoulder lightly, making the other sway back and away from him.

“About that.” John’s smarmy expression goes all *smug*.

Lead a horse to water and make him drink.

From the very start of their training, Bucky had been charismatic. He had been well-liked by most men because he was funny, ready to cause trouble, liked to drink, smoke and gamble and had an infectious

energy about him that livened up a room. After all, it takes certain kind of charm to just outright change someone's name for them, let alone have everyone else abide by and stick to such a change. And those who weren't very fond of Bucky were, well: their COs, the mess hall workers and Gale Cleven himself.

On top of being loud and annoying, Bucky had been *persistent* in his pursuit. And for a week straight after that first breakfast, wherever Gale went, Bucky would follow. Be it the mess, the training courses, the barracks, or even the *showers*, all Gale had to do was turn his head and he'd find Bucky jogging towards him. He'd always have a curled grin on his face and his hand up in the air like he was just about to call out for him, a loud '*Buck, wait up!'* cementing him as said *Buck* in everyone's memory. It had grated on him, made him itch and be twice as careful about how he moved about the base. Made him aware of his own body in a way that he thought he'd escaped by joining up. Nervous. John had made him *nervous.*

It wasn't until John had gotten into it with one of the other guys that he became aware of the fact that the man was actually *serious* in his befriending attempts. For the first three weeks of John doing this, he'd been under the assumption that it was something the other did to amuse himself and the rest of their unit in their free time, deriving some sort of joy from being a bother to Gale specifically. But the guy John had punched in the gut had been one of the man's own friends and he'd done it solely because he had called Gale a *frigid bitch.*

He didn't know it at the time, of course, just thought that Egan was picking fights out of boredom and added it to his own list of reasons to avoid the other soldier. It had taken another week of John inserting himself into every facet of Gale's life for him to find out – and accidentally, too. The information had come from Charles Cruikshank – not yet *Crank* – during one of their morning runs around the base. He had dropped a casual '*Bucky sure seemed offended on your behalf',* a breathy laugh as they jogged uphill, '*considering you don't usually care'.*

It had made him pause, fall behind the other and reconsider what he knew about John Egan. He'd never had anyone stand up for him like that before. Let alone about something that was *true* even if said so crudely. He knew what he came across as, he knew what the consequences of his behavior were. *He didn't know better*, and having the unit's *darling* jump to his defense had left him reeling.

'Stubborn idiot,' Was all that Bucky had mumbled, mouth full of

scrambled eggs and bread, grin wide enough to be considered a little unhinged, once Gale finally relented and sat with him for breakfast without a fuss. It didn't seem like the kindest thing to say to someone that you were trying to be friends with, but it'd been said with such fondness that Gale had felt the walls of his icy demeanor begin showing cracks. It'd made him think that having John Egan around wouldn't be as bad as he assumed.

"Did you miss me?" John asks with his million dollar smile full on blast and Gale wants to say *yes*, *like you wouldn't believe.* But that's a little dramatic to admit to, a little overly attached for only a few weeks apart.

"Like a stone in my shoe," He opts for instead, because that's what John expects and Gale's not one to disappoint.

The clasp of the other's hand against his forearm is strong and he can feel the warmth of that grip even through his jacket. It's good to finally be reunited and he's feeling a little stupid at how paranoid he'd been coming here and expecting John to just be gone. The men file out of their Forts, eager to get settled into their new home, eager to begin flying missions after how much time they'd spent training for it. The two watch them go for a moment before John leads him to the jeep as the rest of the men board the trucks. He'd grumble at getting special treatment from their Air Exec but he's honestly just happy to be in Bucky's presence again.

"How was the flight?"

"Uneventful," He leans back in his seat, letting the air rush past him as Bucky speeds down the tarmac.

"For you, maybe. Crosby missed England by a few miles there." John chuckles and Gale raises an eyebrow.

"You knew?"

"'Course, still not deaf nor dumb. The boys are loud when they think no one's listenin'." Bucky slows them down outside of the officers' mess instead of the barracks.

"And yet, you didn't say a thing," He can't help but smile. There's a kindness in John that makes him unfit for Air Exec duty, that makes him too soft to be anyone's commanding officer. Missing your destination as a *navigator* is no small mistake and yet Bucky hadn't admonished Crosby and the others when he should have. Gave them

reassurance about their Fort being ready soon, instead. No, Bucky's not fit to be anyone's superintendent and it pains Gale that he'll have to fly his missions without the other in a Fort right next to him in formation.

"They made it here safe, is all that matters." Bucky turns the jeep off, easing himself out of the seat. "Sides, their Fort did have an electrical failure. When it happened, however," A careless shrug of wide shoulders, "Who's to say? Not me."

"You'd make a terrible CO," He wiggles out of the top layer of his gear and leaves it in the car, seeing as he's not making it to his bed anytime soon.

"I've been told." John watches him, his joy obvious and Buck feels a little honored, a little lightheaded at the thought of the other being so visibly happy to finally have him, and the rest of their unit, in Thorpe Abbotts.

"They told you when we'll be flyin' our first?" He asks instead of dwelling on the idea of John's happiness.

"Couple of days at least. They'll have you flying drills tomorrow, formations." John holds the door to the mess open for him and Buck feels himself straighten at that. It's not like John's never done that for him – or their other friends – but being away from the other for a month after living in each other's pockets for so many, he's now aware of how it *looks*. And how it looks is, well – John's large frame blocking half the door while he keeps it open because it swings inwards, and Gale having to squeeze past him, feeling suddenly like a skirt on a date.

He clears his throat to chase away the unwarranted comparison and does his best to not brush up against John as he walks into the building.

It's too early for lunch and too late for breakfast in the day so there are no other officers present, leaving the mess mostly empty and eerily silent. John heads straight for the drinks while Gale finds a seat at a table next to a window. It's a sunny day and he's planning to enjoy it while it lasts.

"How was it out there?" He finds himself asking once Bucky rejoins him, fingers idling over lines in the tablecloth.

John's smile sours, growing strained. "You'll see."

“Doesn’t sound promising,” He snorts, the low thrum of fear in him resurfacing with a vengeance. Bucky had flown a few missions already, and sure, he was observing and not doing the actual flying but if he’s reluctant to talk about it, then it’s bad. It’s real fuckin’ bad.

“How about the other crews here. Any standouts?” He shifts the topic into something more likely to get John grinning mischievously, *gossip*.

“Nah, me an’ you are still the best pilots ‘round, hands down.” The other’s posture eases a little, an arm slung around the back of the chair next to him.

“Careful, Curt’ll have a go at ya’ if he hears.” He accepts the cup of coffee the server brings him gratefully.

“Nah, Curt knows he’s third best.” John winks, slurping his coffee loudly for emphasis.

“Yeah? Who’s first, then?” And he’s giving John easy bragging rights, he knows, stroking that ego of his when he doesn’t have to just because they’ve last seen each other a month ago and he’s missed the other something awful.

“You’re number one, Buck.” John says it so *easily* and casually like this is common knowledge, making Gale’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline in surprise. But there’s no traces of mockery in the other’s eyes, only warmth that belies that these are his honest thoughts.

“John Egan *deferring*?” He takes off his hat, bowing his head. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“It’s the truth,” John leans his elbows onto the table in front of him. “Everyone knows you’re the better one between us. Now, don’t get me wrong, it’s not by much-” He snorts and Bucky’s grin curls at the corners. “But you’re less likely to do something recklessly stupid.”

He nods slowly, thinking on the other’s words, on the idea of being better than Bucky at something like this, something so important. He’d always thought they were equal when it came to flying, to leading the men. He’d never separated the two of them in his mind enough to even try and parse who’d be superior on a technical level. But John seems to have given it thought. Or, rather, the men had decided that this was the truth.

John had once said that Buck was like a ghost drifting through basic, not talking to anybody and following orders blindly. Called him a

specter of the *Good Soldier*, every commanding officer's dream. And he supposes that that *did* make him the more reliable of the two pilots. However, this is a technicality *at best.* And Buck would certainly beg to differ, would tell anyone that it was Bucky who was better. Bucky with his fierce determination, undeniable skill and talent for improvisation that's the pilot deserving of the number one spot.

"That depends," He settles on saying instead of singing John's high praises.

"Oh? On what?" Taking the bait, Bucky leans even closer across the table, making the wood creak under his weight.

"On whether I'm following your foolhardy ass into something or not." The door opens and Curt's voice pierces the air. He doesn't mind the way John had gone still in front of him and instead busies himself by focusing on how Curt trips over Meatball and stumbles, the dog having followed him in excitedly.

"If it isn't the Bucks! Together again, color me surprised." Curt makes himself at home in the chair next to Bucky's, slapping the taller on the back. "Wouldn't even let him drop his kit off, huh? Had to whisk him away on your green steed right off the Fort."

"Couldn't let the rest of you lot try and hog his time." Bucky brings a large hand to the top of the other's head and sakes him left and right playfully. "All of you had your chance while I was gone, but it's back to business as usual from now on."

He bites back a smile, rolling his eyes at the other's words. The possessiveness is something that's always been a joke between Bucky and the rest of them. Something the guys prodded at whenever they couldn't find them together, a good-natured joke.

"A whole month apart," DeMarco saunters over, his and Curt's coffees in hand, and sits to his right. "Must've been torture."

Meatball's nails clack against the ground as he rounds the table and settles on his other side, looking up at Gale with piercing eyes as if asking for a treat. Unfortunately, seeing as he's not eating, he doesn't have anything to offer the dog aside from a few scratches to thick fur and a kiss on the forehead. He's real fucking happy DeMarco won that dog.

"You don't even know!" Bucky groans dramatically, throwing his head back all the while. "Nobody on base that speaks my language, nobody

that'll bail my ass out of trouble. Nobody that's as easy on the eyes, either!"

Curt and Benny chuckle at that and Buck feels a hot flush trying to crawl up the back of his neck. John and his big fucking mouth, always the sweet talker.

"No wonder the dames line up for you," Biddick snorts, the sarcasm obvious since the implication is that Buck's better than all of them, even all the pretty girls working at Thorpe Abbotts. It's a stupid little joke that John likes perpetuating, but when it's said in this context, when John's eyes are squinted like *that*, he finds it difficult not to pit himself against all the girls Bucky's messed around with. Which makes no sense because the playing field he's on is not the one the dames are waltzin' across.

"Shut up, John." He throws a crumpled up napkin across at him, feeling somewhat tilted by the topic they've settled on.

"He sure is a dreamboat," Curt winks at him much like John had earlier, but the tilt of it is all wrong – mocking instead of teasing. "Tall, blonde, blue-eyed. Makes you think."

"Jesus, Curt, you wanna fuck 'im instead?" DeMarco grimaces and Curt just flips him off, uncaring.

One would think that after years of association, they'd all be used to the way Curtis Biddick just *says shit.* His attitude always displaying no regard for the consequences, no matter the situation or topic. *Those who aren't afraid to die, never will,* he'd told Gale once, before they shipped him out to England even earlier than John had crossed the pond. He'd thought it a stupid ideology then, does now, too. But it explains some of Biddick's – *quirks*. Like how he's not afraid of a foggy morning before a mission, of the flak-happy Krauts, or of Bucky's glower in that moment either.

"I see some of you boys forgot your manners while Major Cleven and I were apart." John's grin is icy when it reappears, a hand clamped on the back of Curt's neck and making him splutter.

Gale clears his throat, more thrown by Bucky's reaction than Curt's bullshit. "It's the excitement of having new people at the base, they'll remember soon enough." He defends because he doesn't necessarily understand why John's giving Curt shit for this. It's hardly the first time the shorter had said something out of pocket like that and it won't be the last of it either.

“No, no. They’re obviously lackin’ discipline.” John straightens his jacket out, hand moving to grip Curt’s shoulder.

“Bucky,” He sighs, taking a toothpick out of the little tin and putting it to his mouth. This is a stupid hill to die on and John knows it, he’s just being difficult for no reason.

“Mom and dad fightin’ again,” Curt sing-songs under his breath like he’s asking for an ass-kicking.

“Keep talkin’ and they’ll both ground you,” DeMarco snorts and finishes his coffee off. “Come on, Major, I’ll walk you to the bunks if you want directions.”

At the mention of a bed, his muscles notify him that he’s exhausted, actually. So he nods, tapping the table a few times before getting up with the other.

“Hey, I can drive you over.” Bucky tries to offer but Gale shakes his head, knowing that if he lets John linger, he won’t get any rest and it’s been a long day for them all already.

“Weren’t you just about to give him a stern talking-to?” He grins lightly, patting Curt’s other shoulder as he passes him by. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Curt whines, trying to reach for him but Buck ducks out of his grasp. “Ma’! He’s gonna skin me alive, ma’!”

“Made your own bed, Curt.” He waves at the two and nods his goodbyes to the staff before following Meatball and DeMarco outside.

“As needy as ever,” Benny fits his glasses back onto his face and Gale hums at his words.

“That’s Biddick for ya’,” He offers a shrug but DeMarco raises an eyebrow at him.

“Talkin’ about Bucky.” The other sets a course for the buildings in the distance and Gale has to jog lightly to catch up with him, having paused at the other’s words for a bit too long.

“He’s – that’s just how he is.” He defends, again, not understanding why, again. There’s something in him that’s driving him to elaborate further but without putting a name to the need, without giving him the reason as to why he should care how others perceive John when

the man himself doesn't give a damn.

"He must've missed to you real fuckin' bad, then." DeMarco jeers, shaking his head as if in *disapproval* or *disbelief* and something in that tone puts Gale on edge. He's not a violent man. He tries not to be a violent man. But Benny's pushing it and the possibility of a confrontation looms over them.

"I'd kindly ask you to drop this topic, Captain." He's also not one to pull rank when it's not necessary but the other seems to be having an off day and needs a bit of a reminder.

Benny grimaces and takes his hat off to run his hand through his hair. "You're right, Major. I'm sorry, I meant no disrespect. Major Egan just tends to… come on strong sometimes."

"We've all had a long day," He agrees, deescalating like he is wont to do. "Best we get some rest before those practice flights we were promised."

"Yessir," DeMarco nods eagerly and the topic is sufficiently dead and buried.

He doesn't know why or what had set Benny off like that but Gale reckons it has something to do with how, despite all of them being friends, Buck is still *Buck*. And Buck gets preferential treatment. DeMarco probably had to walk all the way to the mess in the heat while Gale rode in with the Air Exec. He'll need to sort that out with John eventually but for now, he's looking forward to a long nap before dinner.

Being woken up for an actual mission feels like an out of body experience. The light shining down upon him like the great heavens above promise nothing but pain in an uncertain future. But duty calls so he rises before the sun does. He stumbles through washing his teeth, automatically gets into his uniform and starts the walk towards breakfast.

The mess is abuzz with activity, filled out with all the crews flying and he finds himself joining Biddick and DeMarco at the table.

"Curt, I'll be flying with you today."

"Aw, Ma's supervising." The other mumbles but his heart's not in it so he doesn't pay it any mind, leaning forward to pat Meatball instead.

The dog's been mooching off of every table since Benny got there and has been sufficiently fed sub-par eggs.

"Got anyone watching him?" He scratches at the dog's scruff and Meatball whirrs around to lap at his hand.

"Lemmons or Wink will take care of him," Benny holds out a bit of bacon and it's immediately snatched up by sharp teeth. The *in case I don't make it* is left hanging in the air, unsaid. They're all high-strung, all anxious to get in the air like they trained to but being faced with the reality of it is a little different.

The sun's barely starting to show, the pre-dawn horizon blue and he meets Bucky outside of the briefing hut.

"Looking well-rested, Major." Bucky holds out a hand for him to clasp and he obliges, feeling the chill of the other's fingers press under the hem of his sleeve and into the warmth of his wrist.

"Yeah, we'll see if that's enough." He sighs and the other grimaces.

"First mission." Bucky's tone is solemn and he remembers the other's reaction when he'd asked that first day at Thorpe Abbotts.

"Sure you don't have anything to tell me about being out there?" He gives the other a chance but Bucky remains reticent.

"You'll see soon enough."

Their talk is cut short by the arrival of the COs and Major Veal, the others urging the two of them to follow inside. Buck shakes off he jitters best as he can and obliges, doing his best to meet John's eyes and impart on him that *this conversation isn't over* but Bucky avoids him expertly.

Their target is Bremen, the U-boat pens on the river. There are whistles around the room because they all know the mission is a big one. He gets assigned lead pilot of the 350th even though he's flying with Curt instead of in a Fort of his own. The responsibility of it settles onto his shoulders and he takes a deep breath to steel himself. *This is what they trained for.* Flak all the way to Bremen and they're in the low-low. It's one hell of a first mission. He writes it all down, tries his best to memorize it but the words *Tail-end Charlie* ring through his head even as he's getting into his gear.

The priest comes in to offer them his services and he thinks about how

little that'll help anyone. But he knows some of the boys are religious, that some of them pray before every meal and keep their crosses about their necks. He's not one for it, but it's only polite to set a good example so he nods at the priest even as he sees Curt rolling his eyes off to the side.

"Thank you, Padre. We'll be sure to keep that in mind."

He leaves the hut once he's done to find Bucky waiting for him outside, a harried look about him. He can't imagine what the other feels like, being stuck grounded while the rest of them get to go up. He winces at the thought of this being a privilege and not a duty but he says nothing about it as John holds out a folded bill for him to take.

"You settling accounts?" He asks because there's no other reason for Bucky to be handing him money.

"It's my lucky deuce," Bucky's smile is sheepish like he knows what he's about to say is stupid.

"Your lucky – Jesus, John." He eyes the bill warily as John insists on keeping it in the air between them as they walk to the back of the truck that's going to be taking him across base and to the Fort.

"Two corners for two missions, two wheels down. Take it, for luck." The other goads, persistent as always.

John knows he doesn't believe in luck, knows that whatever happens, Gale will think it's on either them or the Krauts. They get shot down? The Krauts had good aim. They do their mission successfully? They're units filled with skilled pilots and crews. Luck's got nothing to do with it, really. *But he can't* – the look in John's shadowed eyes is pleading and Gale can't deny him much of anything, let alone something small as this. If this is enough to put Bucky's mind at ease, he'll do it.

"Alright," He takes the deuce and holds it in his hands as he boards.

He sees Curt and Bucky give each other air-kisses as the back of the truck gets closed but he's too busy staring down at the worn bill to pay it any mind. He should say something else. Should reassure Bucky more than he's tried to. But. *But.* They both know that this is where this war begins to impact them directly. Only once they're moving does he look up to see John standing there in his god-awful sheepskin jacket and with his hands on his hips.

They'd both joined before the war even began. They both fell in love with flying. And now he's going up there and into the thick of it without Bucky by his side where he always thought the other would be. They used to map the stars together at night, laid out on the sun-warmed tarmac when the barracks became too stifling. They used to talk about flying a B-17 together and then when they'd both been made Majors, talked about leading units in a formation together. But he's been denied that, now. Denied the opportunity to see the damage John can do when he's in his element. Denied the security of knowing that they either go down as one or make it back a pair.

Curt gives the crew of *Wild Cargo* a speech and then all eyes turn to him. He feels embarrassment trying to make itself known on his face but he pushes it down, it's his own fault for not paying attention. He's supposed to say something, he knows, but with his thoughts stuck back on Bucky, he's not sure he can follow Biddick up with anything worthwhile.

He clears his throat and nods, "Let's rack em' up and knock em' down, boys."

Curt looks at him from under the brim of his cap as the men file into the Fort.

"You gonna do something about it?"

"'Bout what?" He tugs on his gloves, fastening them firmer against his wrists, *fiddling*.

"The fact that Bucky's not here in the air with us today."

He chuckles; leave it to Curt to cut straight down to the heart of the problem. He may be full of every tall tale known to man, but he's a direct, observant, son of a bitch. This is why Gale could never be mad at him, no matter how many times he calls him *ma*.

"If all of this goes to plan, I just might." He affirms, already planning out how to approach Huglin with the request.

Biddick smacks him on the arm, "No *might's*, he's a shit Air Exec and you know it. If anyone can get him demoted, it's you. And please, do it soon – for all our wellbeing."

"Precious cargo you're roughing up there, Curt." Dickie throws from the inside of the Fort and Curt points a threatening finger at the man.

“Mind your own business,” The shorter clambers into the plane and lands heavily onto his usual copilot as Gale watches, amused. The men tousle for a moment before Dickie pinches Curt’s cheek, stretching it wide enough to hurt and the pilot relents.

“Ow, *ow.* Alright, alright! Everyone in positions! No more dallying.”

Gale doesn’t point out that he was the one doing the stalling in the first place.

The left seat’s available once he reaches the cockpit and he raises an eyebrow at the other, a smile forming on his lips.

“You saved my seat.” He eases himself into it, feeling the worn grooves reshape to his form.

“Rather offer it to you, than have you sit on my lap.” Biddick grins, “God knows *some people* would complain.”

“Ready for the checklist.”

The plane comes alive under them and then they’re moving.

Being the first plane off the ground is nothing to scoff at. He doesn’t say anything when, despite his earlier eye-roll, Curt crosses himself. It feels like he should do something similar, have something to anchor himself to once the going gets tough. Instead of praying to God for divine intervention, he takes the photo of Marge he always has on him out of his jacket and pins it to the panel in front of him, clear in view. This, this is whose safety he’s fighting for. This is why this war ends in Europe.

He thinks that the moment the flak stopped berating the Forts will forever be ingrained in his memory. The sudden silence of the cloudy sky, the emptiness of the low-visibility that preceded the appearance of the enemy fighters will ring loud in his head for a long while. Three planes down in a matter of minutes.

He sits in the shot-up Fort, hands on his knees and wonders. Wonders if this is why John never said anything. Wonders if there’ll ever be any words to describe the feeling of watching planes drop out of the sky like flies. He hears the truck leaving the tarmac and hears the quiet murmurs of the engineers talking about how *lucky* they are to have made it, how shredded the wings are. He doesn’t feel particularly *lucky* even with Bucky’s deuce burning a hole in his pocket.

John is there once he leaves the Fort, waiting in his jeep, the privilege of it obvious. Everyone else has already left but he'd afforded Buck the time to dally, to wallow in the reality of their situation.

"Buck? Come on, I gotta get you to interrogation." The other's voice is subdued even if he's trying to act like nothing is wrong.

"I didn't drop a single bomb." He says out loud, realizing that they've *failed.* "Had to salvo the bombs over the channel." The silence between them grows until he turns around to face John. The other's face is contorted in a grimace. "Why didn't you tell me? You've been up, you refused to say a damn thing."

John shakes his head, his grip on the steering wheel growing tight. "Didn't know what to say." He looks like it pains him to admit it and some of the anger leaves Buck in an instant. "You've seen it now."

He can't imagine what it was like for Bucky. Forced to sit back and watch, *observe,* he would have had the realization that this is what his friends were being sent into, what would wait for them once they joined him overseas. He doesn't blame him for not saying anything, Gale doesn't think he'd have the words either.

"I don't know what I saw." He closes his eyes briefly, the afterimage of a Fort going up in flames flashing to the forefront. "Thirty guys just… gone."

Bucky hisses through clenched teeth, slamming his open palm against the wheel. "Should have been up there with you."

He throws his bag into the back of the car and gets in, thinking about Curt's earlier words. "Yeah, you should have. Wasted here on the ground."

John groans as he starts the car back up. "Tell me about it. If I have to make another call to the Brits requesting more masks, I'm gonna punch Huglin in his smug face."

"Don't kick a man while he's down, John." He sighs, feeling the nerves churn in his gut, he's going to have to go into interrogation and report what had happened, report his failure and their losses to the commanding officers. He doesn't think he remembers a damn thing other than seeing the three forts dropping from the sky.

"You're not injured, right?" John asks instead and he shakes his head.

“Nothing a good night’s sleep can’t fix.”

Unfortunately, sleep doesn’t come to him that night. He tosses and turns in his bunk, running through their flight path, through what he could have done different, until he’s made himself sick to his stomach with it. Maybe he should have gone out with Curt and the guys, at least then he’d have an excuse as to why he’s still awake. He gets up before dawn, puts his uniform on and heads for a walk. His legs take him between the Nissen huts, down the worn paths and around some mud before he finds himself standing in front of the new COs office. The light is on and he gives himself only a brief minute to consider before going in.

“You’re up early, Major.” The Colonel looks up from the stack of papers in front of him.

“Could say the same for you, sir.” He offers up a hand and the man rises from his seat to clasp it. “Major Gale Cleven.”

“Colonel Harding,” The other motions to the chair in front of his desk and Buck takes a seat. “What can I do for you, Major Cleven? I doubt this is a courtesy visit.”

“Unfortunately not, sir.” He clears his throat. “I came to talk to you about our Air Exec, John Egan.”

Harding hums, shuffling some of the loose sheets as if he’s looking for something. “Colonel Huglin did mention him, yes.”

“I think that he is not fit for his current duty as Air Exec.” Gale fights the urge to fiddle under the man’s pointed stare. “He is an excellent leader, but he does this best when in charge of a squadron. His talents are being wasted on the ground.”

Harding purses his lips and taps his fingers against the paper he’d pulled from the pile. “You’re advocating for a demotion?”

“Yes, sir.” He doesn’t hesitate to say it, this is what’s best for John. Even if he’s costing Bucky a cushy job on base, he’s going to be where he’s needed most. And maybe it’s selfish, maybe he’s doing this for his own peace of mind, too, but it’s undeniable that this is what everyone’s been thinking. It just fell to Buck to try and make it happen.

“You’re in luck then, Major, that Colonel Huglin seems to be in agreement with you.” Harding pushes the paper over to him and Gale

takes it. He scans through the typed report and fights back a grin. The short, concise sentences go straight to the point, calling John unfit for duty and irresponsible but praise his skills in a plane and with the men of his unit. It's the kindest thing a COs said about John since basic.

"Colonel Huglin went ahead and got that ready for you before he left." Harding smirks, handing him a pen. "Your signature, Major, and he'll be back in a Fort in no time."

It feels wrong to thank the man for essentially firing John, but he still has the urge to do so. This is what Curt asked him to do, this is what Bucky's wanted since the start, this is what Gale can do for all of them.

"Sir," He nods and signs his name in neat cursive, possibly sealing Bucky's fate.

There's a noticeable skip in his step when John enters the officers' mess later that same morning. He's got a shiner forming around his eye but there's a subtle smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

"I got demoted," He says unceremoniously, making Kidd pause with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth.

"To?" He asks because Harding didn't say, because Buck hadn't asked further after leaving the man's office.

"CO of the 418th squadron." Bucky's tone lilts and Gale knows that what comes out of his mouth next will barely conceal the mirth of the tone. "Sorry, Jack, the boys are back with me."

Kidd sighs and continues eating, "That's fine, as long as I get my Fort back."

"Well," Bucky drawls, smacking his lips as if in regret. "Harding wants to see about that."

Kidd drop his utensils and Gale winces. His eyes volley between the two but Bucky's pointedly not looking at Jack as the man connects the dots.

"What? I'm Air Exec?"

"Wasn't my idea." Bucky, still messing with the buttons of his

uniform, defends. “Huglin recommended you.”

“You son of a bitch.” Kidd gets up, breakfast forgotten and Buck tunes them out, focusing on his own as John makes feeble excuses. It’s useless, they know that Air Exec is a thankless job and that Jack had just gotten saddled with it because of Buck, Bucky and Colonel Huglin – even if they’re none the wiser about Gale’s involvement.

Jack’s strides are long and the line of his shoulders angry as he finally departs, no doubt taking his turn in Harding’s office. Kidd’s absence, while expected, does leave Buck under the full force of John’s accusing stare. It’s his turn to ignore a person at their table and he becomes engrossed in finishing his breakfast as soon as possible.

“You got up early,” John spins his coffee cup idly in its little saucer.

“Did I?” He hums, meeting the other’s eye. There’s something pleased in that stare that makes him feel *embarrassed*, of all things. There are great many things John’s said to him over the years but he’d only managed to make him embarrassed on two occasions. The first time was during their second month of actually being friends when he’d serenaded Buck for a whole hour while drunk – which was, coincidentally, also the day he found out Bucky can’t sing for shit. And the second is right here and right now with that god-awful fond look on his face that speaks too much.

“See Colonel Harding before me?” The other takes a sip before setting the cup down. “Oh, I can read upside-down, Buck.”

Harding should really be more careful where he leaves his official documents, Gale thinks. Unless this was done entirely on purpose, in which case, the man needs to mind his own business.

“All I said is that they’re right about you leading best as a squadron commander. Told them the truth. You don’t gotta send me any flowers.” And that’s it, the topic’s dropped because he can feel the heat trying to rush into his cheeks and he refuses to speak on it further.

“I made one last request,” John’s voice lowers down into a calmer pitch which catches Gale’s attention again. “Said I wanted to write the letters to the families of the boys that we lost.”

His heart gives a sad pang at the words. He wants to sigh and shake his head because this is – this is who John is. He’s just volunteered himself to sit through painstakingly typing out thirty or so letters

informing families of their losses because, *well*.

“I think it’d be better coming from me than somebody they’ve never met.” John’s hand wavers where it’s resting on the table and he starts picking at a scab on his palm. John Egan, reckless but so, *so* kind.

“I’ll help you,” He nods because there’s no way he’d let the other do this on his own. Those were his men, too. Those were the men both of them were supposed to be leading, *together*.

“I’d appreciate that,” Bucky shifts in his seat and Gale watches him lean forward. There’s something in his eyes that he can’t place. It’s not mirth anymore, nor that same fond resignation from earlier. It’s more serious, more honest. He puts down his fork and leans back, waiting for the other to find the words.

“You know,” John starts after a few seconds of silence. “If this whole thing ended, and there were only two pilots left up in the air…” He trails off briefly, huffing out a sharp breath. “It’d be me, and it’d be you, Buck.”

The words settle over him like a warm blanket, making him sweat under the collar, *constricting*. There are so many things that are implied there, so many possibilities. He knows John means it to be a reassurance, to be a promise that they can do this together, but Buck’s always been good at catastrophizing. Only two pilots on the losing side sure ain’t the same as the only two pilots winning a war. And the *only* part in itself – while the sentiment is nice and well-meaning, Buck would like it if more than just the two of them made it to the end.

“Don’t count on it,” It’s a pessimistic response, something that’d shoot anyone’s hopes out of the sky. But John Egan isn’t just anyone so he just smiles at Gale, looking pleased as all hell.

The sun streaking in through the window highlights the blooming red on the other’s cheek and he remembers that he wanted to ask about that.

“How’d you get the shiner?” He motions to his own face in order to approximate its position and John winces.

“Asked Curt to lay one on me.”

“*John*.”

Back when he'd first introduced John to Marge, once they'd already been well established as a duo – Buck and Bucky, joined at the hip – she'd taken one look at John and immediately declared him *good for her Gale.*

He remembers being baffled even as John whooped and hollered that he'd gotten her approval so fast, Marge watching on with a fond smile. He remembers asking her later what it was about John that'd made her so sure and she had smiled at him cryptically.

'A woman's intuition', she'd said and Gale had tugged her into a spin, making her giggle. '*He's bright, full of life. Maybe he'll get you to loosen up, some'* she'd added after some more prodding eventually. And as with most things, Marge had ended up being right about that, too. If there was anyone on base that could make Gale Cleven do something stupid and reckless, it's always been John Egan. Now, no matter how hard he tried, John couldn't get him to drink, gamble, and dance or care about sports, but doing dumb dares that involved planes? Well, Buck would never say no to flying.

He watches as the other makes his way across the crowded pub, pausing briefly by Dye and Lil' – something that makes him curious about what exactly had transpired there – before joining back up with them and the Brits currently being all high and mighty at their table. Gale had tuned them out already. Once he'd heard the '*it's a question of philosophies',* he'd written the conversation off as a bust.

John drops into his seat and claps a big hand onto Buck's thigh, not leaving him much choice but to accept the firm grip. They're all a little squished together, the low ceilings and the mix of soldiers and civilians making free space scarce. Curt's on his other side, practically breathing down his neck with how he's sitting, too. Logically, he should feel uncomfortable, but he's way past the stage of his life where he can't tolerate a few overly-friendly touches from his drunk friends.

Croz arrives with their drinks and leans over Gale's shoulder to place them on the table, there's barely room to breathe but Buck feels at ease. He takes his ginger beer and by the time it takes him to finish it, John's already threatening physical violence upon their British companions. He can't say that he blames him.

So he doesn't discourage Bucky, letting the rest of the guys step in as the Brits try to goad him into singing. Gale observes instead, watches how his eyes dance between the British pilots, Curt and over into the

distance where Dye's still chatting Lil' up. He nudges the other with his knee and Bucky's eyes snap to him, intense in their focus.

"…baseball!" The tail end of Curt's sentence has John grinning but his eyes don't stray again.

"Specifically Yankees," John points to him then. "But my friend Buck, here, he thinks they're a waste of time. Don't you?"

He lets John and Curt shout over each other, trying to outdo one another and the rest of their men know what to expect, know how this goes. There are chuckles and a few pats to Curt's back as he clambers up into his chair, fitting his smaller frame even closer to Gale.

"Not just sports he doesn't follow, huh?" Biddick tries catching his attention but he's too busy having a silent staring contest with John. Something in him is reluctant to pull away, reluctant to miss even a moment of the other's carefree grin. Possibly afraid that he'll never see it again.

"No, you don't follow anyone." Curt goads, intent on getting to a topic of some sort now that he's started talking.

John chuckles, his smile so *warm* and genuine that it makes Gale's own grace his lips. John's hand briefly squeezes his face, fingers dragging across his skin and leaving a scorching trail that makes his cheeks tingle, the heat of it somehow *cloying,* before moving his attention to Biddick.

"I follow you, Curt." He turns away the same time as Bucky does and finds himself a little too close to Biddick's face. The other's eyebrows are raised as he zones in on the story he wants to tell, sending him one of those air kisses usually reserved for John.

"And he would still find a way to show off." Curt leans back, talking to the table at large now, telling them about – about one of those dares involving flying, a rare show of his own penchant for trouble that had been long dormant until John had shown up.

Buzzing the tower isn't something that's usually recommended. Flying so close to any building, let alone one so important, should be, by all means, frowned upon. And yet it'd taken Gale one smarmy look and smug comment from John, a *bet you're too much of a priss* and Gale had feathered his three engines (three, despite Curt insisting it was four) and sailed as close to the ground as he dared. They'd gotten washroom cleaning duty for two weeks for it but it had been worth it.

It'd been worth the look of amazement on John's face then and the proud glimmer in his eyes now.

"No-engine Cleven." Bubbles announces and they toast him like he's already a hero.

"Would you have rather been a fighter pilot, Major?" The middle of the three Brits asks and before he can respond, John's already jumping to his defense, a hand back on his leg – this time to keep John himself steady more than anything.

"Buck is a fighter pilot. He just happens to fly a bus."

"So are you, Bucky." Bubbles offers up a hand and John clasps it, grateful and more than a little drunk with how he shines at the praise so obviously.

"So let me get this straight, you're Buck and he's Bucky?"

There it is again, that question, *the* question. Except this time, it's coming with an *accent.* And it's sounding mighty *accusatory* being said. Somehow, Gale doesn't think John will be gracing them with their story this time around.

"Is there a shortage of nicknames in the 100th?" The Brits share a chuckle amongst themselves and Buck feels how John tenses up where they're pressed together.

"No, just a shortage of crews." The table grows silent.

The middle of the three, either not being able to read the room or having no courtesy to do so, just hums and says "Pity."

"Pity, pity, *pity*." John repeats and for once, Gale's not inclined to stop him from getting into trouble. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, it's a pity. These losses are avoidable, naturally, and if you flew your missions at night, there'd be no shortages of men *or* nicknames in the 100th."

Curt wheezes next to him, a silent *ah, fuck,* and Buck sees it coming before John even opens his mouth.

"Now why'd you have to go and say somethin' like that?" Bucky's tone is lilting but razor-sharp, promising violence if provoked even a step further.

“Perhaps I was getting bored of all the heavy-petting going on at your end of the table,” The man smirks, sharing a look with his two friends, one that speaks volumes to the only sober head in the room.

“I don’t even know what that means,” Bucky sneers. Leaned back in his seat, he looks around as if expecting an explanation. Some of the men echo his sentiment but Buck stays quiet, twisting his tin of toothpicks between stiff fingers. *Gale* knows what it means, he knows what they’re trying to say. It’s all the touching he’s allowed tonight, all the easy ways in which the men around him fit together because they’re all *friends* and not just soldiers filling up the ranks. The easy affection must be startling to someone as up-tight as the RAF pilots and having it mocked so blatantly makes something in him flare blood red.

He’s not a violent man, he tries not to be. But with such an accusation thrown at them, concealed with language they wouldn’t understand, he thinks that he might allow himself this one concession. So when the Brits offer to *make a sport* out of it, he rises to the bait willingly. He’s not a violent man, but he sure as hell knows how to knock teeth out efficiently.

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” He stops Bucky from rising with a hand on his shoulder and stands up instead, fully intent on being the one to throw a punch tonight.

Curt’s got other plans, however, and steps into his space quickly. Gray-blue eyes peer up at him, accompanied by a sloppy grin.

“Let me have this one, ma’, I promise to do all my chores for a whole week.” The other’s tone is quiet enough in the cacophony of chair legs scraping against the wooden floors and the men getting ready for a show so that only Gale hears him.

“Sides, you gotta take care of Bucky. Look at ‘im, poor bastard’s moping over *Lil’,* of all people.” Biddick snort, “A homewrecker, that one!”

“Go get ‘em, Curt.” He rolls his eyes but the tension leaves his shoulders some. He knows Crutis has a mean left hook on top of being fast even when more than a little drunk. He lets the men leave the pub ahead of him, waiting to see what John will do and sure enough, the other pauses to talk to the girl. Whatever he says to her makes her frown heavily and when he turns, he’s got a self-satisfied grin on his face. There’s something there that doesn’t sit right with Buck so he

ignores it, joins the men outside instead.

Curt is punching air as John stumbles into him, twirls him around for a moment before setting his eyes on Gale and eagerly draping an arm over his shoulders. He suspects the other needs the support in order to stop himself from swaying, more than it being a gesture of friendship this time around. Arms crossed over his chest, he watches the Brit get ready.

“Boxing, huh?” John’s whiskey breath washes over his face, causing an involuntary grimace to overtake his expression.

“A test of manhood,” He repeats the words that’d been told to him many times in his childhood, the phrasing familiar even if it makes him wince internally.

“That so?” The other’s voice pitches up with the question, disbelief clear in it and Buck fights back a smile. He’s very fond of getting John’s tone to sound like that, always choosing words that’ll make the other huff and pout. John chooses to make a fool of himself for everyone’s amusement, always entertaining and fooling around. But it’s only with Gale that he lets himself be genuine in his reactions and this – this pleases Buck more than he’d like to think about.

“About as true a measure of your will to fight as any. Man on man, face to face.” He ignores how heavily the other is leaning on him, how he’s dragging his right side slightly down with the scorching heat of his tall frame.

“Oh, so you just don’t like team sports?” Bucky’s knuckles press into his face in a mockery of a punch and Gale’s suddenly afraid of turning his head. The other is alarmingly close to him and he’s allowing it to happen again. This isn’t the first time, no, and if he lets John have an inch, he’s going to be taking miles in no time. He’s way past the flinching and the jolting away from the familiar touch, yes, but it doesn’t mean that he has no boundaries to be crossed.

It’d been difficult, at first, before John had gotten him used to it – all the casual touching. Bucky’s a physical guy, he’s large and imposing but Gale had quickly found that he also loved folding himself into people, making himself smaller to fit. He clasps shoulders, pats backs and ruffles hairs and this becomes even more prominent when he’s drunk. Everyone who’s bothered by it knows to stay out of the reach of his wingspan, it just so happens that Gale’s the one person that never does.

“I don’t care to lose sleep over whether the pinstripes beat the polka dots.” He doesn’t move away, letting Bucky sway them together instead as Curt goads the RAF pilot into taking the first swing.

“Well, we’re all just uniforms anyway, you know that?” Bucky squeezes him closer and the fight starts.

It’s anticlimactic, in a way. The British pilot takes a shot that misses by a mile as Curt ducks and the men cheer. Then, it’s all over in a swing of Biddick’s mean left. The Brit goes down like a sack of grain at the jab and the men around them celebrate. John jumps against him, grin immediately widening as Curt rushes for them. The shorter tries to squeeze himself in between their forms but Bucky’s not budging even as he mocks the RAF pilot, arm firmly around Buck’s shoulders.

“That was too much o’ that!” He’s making a yapping motion with his hand as he peers at the guy still on the ground and Curt mimics him, happy to have done well. Money passes hands and Gale keeps the two of them steady as the men clamor.

“I got a nickname for you and it ain’t *Buck*!” Is John’s parting jab as he picks Curt up and carries him down the road.

Gale can’t help the wide grin that overtakes his face. This is – these are his friends. And the truth of the matter is that he probably wouldn’t have any of them if it weren’t for John Egan. Marge was right about him being good for Gale, she was right about letting someone other than her in. She may be the one waitin’ for him at home, but John was right here next to him. John was with him in the midst of it. He falls behind slightly, letting the men amble in front of him but as if sensing his absence, John snaps back around and immediately finds him with his eyes. The taller rushes past the other airmen, clipping Kidd on the shoulder in the process, and Gale has only a moment to take a step back before John’s picking him up, too, twirling him around in his joy.

He’s *certain* he hadn’t drank a lick of alcohol that night but as John sets him back down, he feels dizzy and shaky all over. John’s hands squeeze his waist and Gale has to pull himself away from the other as his knees lose some of their stability – he’s oddly breathless.

“No offense to Curt,” John whispers conspiratorially, letting him go as they start moving again. “But I would have loved seein’ you throw that punch.”

“Maybe next time,” He pats John’s cheek, pushing him away and out

of his space but John's not one to be deterred easily. He clings to Gale instead, pulling him as if they were on the dance floor and Buck has to bend back a little to meet the other's squinted eyes.

"Promise?" John's voice rumbles low in the silent street, their friends having moved on without them already.

"If we come across anymore RAF knuckleheads like those three, sure." He says with a distracted smile because John's started swaying them left and right like they really are dancing. He doesn't know what to think about it, can't really wrap his brain around the picture they must make. Like John had picked him up at the pub, like he's one of the dames that caught Bucky's eye.

"I'll knock 'em clean down." He smacks the other's chest lightly and Bucky's eyes track the motion of his hand, oddly intent. He should shove the other away, help him get back to base and into bed because he's obviously past the point of being just slightly drunk. John's off his fucking rocker if he's mistaken Gale for a suitable dance partner. He finds that that particular thought *stings*, funny enough.

"Come on, we need to get back." He tries again because John's still not saying anything, just staring at him down his straight nose, mouth pursed.

"Nah," Bucky finally drawls, "I think I'd like to stay here."

He rolls his eyes and flicks the other's forehead before gripping Bucky's thumb and twisting it back enough to hurt.

"Ow, *ow, ow!* Gale Cleven, you son of a bitch!" Bucky bends with the motion, releasing Buck from his hold as he tries to alleviate the pressure he's putting on the thumb.

"Bedtime, Bucky." He tutts and lets the digit go, prompting the other to immediately bring it to his mouth as if sucking on his thumb like a baby will ease the hurt. "Don't be dramatic."

"You're so mean to me," John whines but they're moving again so Gale will call that a win. Even if he still feels a little unmoored, a little unsteady in the legs, still wants to bury his hands in John's hair.

"You'll thank me in the morning."

They do eventually catch up with the rest of the guys and he hands Bucky off to Bubbles and Croz, the two navigators eagerly chatting

about baseball with him. Finally free of the weight of John's gaze, he is subjected to Curt's curious peering instead.

"What is it?" He takes the shorter under his arm, already resigned to always being accosted by at least one of his friends.

"I think I should've punched 'im harder," Curt concludes, making Buck burst out in a startled laugh. That wasn't exactly what he was expecting to hear.

"You got him good, Curt, don't worry." He knocks his forehead against the other's temple and Curt beams up at him, proud and shining with it.

"No wonder Egan's always vying for your praise," The shorter quips, affection evident in his accented words. "You're makin' me feel like a million bucks, Buck!"

"That was terrible," He informs the other and Curt waves him off, undeterred.

"You didn't get me anything for my win." He whines and Gale raises an eyebrow, not really up for questioning the drunken logic of the other's mind.

"Oh? That high praise not enough for ya'?" He pokes the other pilot in the side and Curt squeaks endearingly, fighting out of his grip.

"I defended our honor, I should be knighted!" Biddick declares with flourish and he rolls his eyes.

"I dub thee, Sir Biddick of the 100th Bombardment group. Knight of Thorpe Abbotts." He places his hand on Curt's left shoulder then his right one, then he smacks him on the forehead and the shorter laughs. The noise draws eyes back to them and he can see Blakely and Kidd shaking their heads at Curt's antics but he doesn't mind them. He can also see John frowning over his shoulder.

"This better not get me any special treatment or pa'll have my head." Biddick hums lowly, a shit-stirring grin on his face. It's an odd thing to say but, once again, far be it for Buck to try and parse out a drunk man's thoughts. So he just hums and urges Curt forward, herding him akin to herding cats as he strays from the path every couple of minutes. At some point a song breaks out but Buck's too tired to try and corral them.

Sometimes, it's best to let sleeping dogs lie.

The thing about being a part of the Air Force is that they seem to take any chance they can to celebrate. Any minor victory, any practice mission run right and without casualties, any birthday, engagement or divorce, it all calls for celebration. And more often than not, Buck finds himself accompanying Bucky when he inevitably gets roped into one such celebration. He could just say no, of course, but it's good for morale. It's good that they can see him as a friend instead of a commanding officer, that they aren't afraid to joke around with him or come to him for advice. It's also to keep John out of trouble which he is reluctant to admit because he already gets called a *mother hen* enough.

But John seems to be doing alright on his own tonight so Buck's been able to take it easy and sit back, Meatball by his side as DeMarco cheats the new recruits out of their money.

He sips his ginger beer and watches as John's mouth stretches wide, belting out the lyrics to some song the Irish had taught him. They've joined him in the chorus, of course, but Bucky's still the loudest and the brightest. And once he's done, the music returns to something faster, something people can dance to. Gale notes that there are at least three girls hovering at John's shoulder tonight. Two of them he's seen around before but the third one is new. She looks like the girls back home, blonde with her short hair curled and lips painted red. Her nose is all wrong and her eyes are the wrong color so she doesn't necessarily remind him of Marge but the thought is there. She's also the one that John chooses to dance with.

Usually, he'd just watch out for if the skirt has a gentleman that would try and defend her against Bucky's charms, he'd watch out for anyone John maybe said anything *untoward* to or some poor bastard that thinks John owes him money (which he probably does). But this time, his eyes stray to the actual dancing. John's bigger than her by a bit, but he still moves with the gentleness of an experienced dancer even if the song's energetic in its tune. He spins the girl around, making her skirt flare out, making her giggle as he picks her up briefly. They look like a nice pair, the contrast of them striking something in Gale's core as familiar.

She clings to his wide shoulders as the song switches out for a slow one and they readjust to an easier sway, John's hand on her waist, covering almost half of it. *Oh*, Gale's eyes widen as he realizes why the

familiarity is so startling. *Oh, that's him and John*. That was him and John just the other day, right after Curt had knocked that RAF pilot out, that's John clinging to him and swaying them in the silent street under the moonlight.

He remembers thinking about what a sight they must have made, and seeing it from the outside, if slightly altered, it – it has something in his chest curling like a vise. It's too much, suddenly, and he doesn't know *why*. He's seen Bucky dance with a truly impressive amount of girls, seen him take them out behind bars and pubs, seen him come back in the morning covered in red marks and lipstick stains, he's seen it all. And yet this simple image of John cradling her like he had held Gale only recently is making his head feel like it's filled with cotton. He need air, surely that's it. He takes Meatball by the harness and uses him as an excuse to leave the building.

The cold of the outside is bracing, even in the warmer months, the countryside weather is unforgivable. He sucks in a deep breath to center himself, to organize his thoughts. The dog pants next to him, content to just keep sitting by his side as he has his crisis. This is stupid, he's being ridiculous. There has to be something else to the tightness in his chest.

The door opens and he winces away, turning just in time to see Bucky and the blonde dame leaving the building, heads bent together. She spots him and Meatball first because John's too engrossed in whispering sweet nothings into her ear, and shies away from the dog who's got his tongue hanging out of his open maw.

"Don't worry, that's just Meatball." John says before he finally realizes that it's not DeMarco next to his dog. The taller freezes, hands on her waist but his gaze boring into Gale's.

"Buck," John breathes, a worried frown replacing his earlier joy. "Everything alright?"

"Sure, Bucky, just getting some air." He knows the smile on his face is frail, unsure, but he hopes it's enough for John.

"Do you – you want me to drive you back to the barracks? I can drop you off if you're feeling unwell." The other pries himself from the girl, coming closer to him instead and Gale just – he doesn't want to think about this anymore. He shakes his head firmly, a denial as clear as any.

"It's fine, John. Go have fun." He motions to the girl and she catches

John's wrist in her hand shyly, tugging him back.

"Bucky," Her voice is light and lilting, sweet as it scrapes down Gale's spine.

John stares at him with something in his eyes that he can't parse through. It's most likely suspicion, but he doesn't - he's not willing to explain himself further. He pats John's shoulder and ushers Meatball back inside, opting to ignore John instead.

Whatever the hell is wrong with him is going to clear up soon. A good night's rest and it'll go away.

Curt's boring holes into his head by the time he makes it to the table and he prays to God that the other doesn't say anything. He knows he looks shaken, that he's frowning heavily – can feel it tugging on his brow, but he can't talk about this. Mostly because he doesn't know what *this* is.

"A dime a dozen," Curt says as he sways into Buck's space, leaning his shoulder into him. The usually-comforting presence now feels stifling but he forces himself to endure.

"What?" He grunts, eyeing the other's drink and wishing that he was weak enough to go against his own rules.

"Skirts like that come and go," The shorter shrugs, locking his ankle around Buck's. "He'll be back home by morning."

He doesn't respond, mind blanking on any appropriate wording that he could grace the other with. He sips his leftover ginger beer, cards his hand through Meatball's fur and watches Brady make a fool out of himself flirting with some Red Cross volunteer for the rest of their stay there.

Bucky does eventually come back to the barracks. He slinks in just before sunrise, late enough that Gale's already awake. He stinks of lavender and whiskey, making him think of his grandma's house. He watches with one eye as John sits on his cot and puts his head in his hands. He's hunched over, breathing heavily, almost heaving. Gale wants to go to him, comfort him any way that he can but he stays put – something holding him in place, not letting him reach out like he usually would. Eventually, John drops into bed, fully dressed, and falls asleep.

Gale gets up and goes about his day like he usually would, whatever's

wrong with him decidedly not fixed as of yet.

It becomes a chore after that, accompanying John to the various celebrations. It becomes less about group morale, less about keeping John out of trouble, and more about saving face, about keeping up pretenses that he wants to be there.

The urge to retreat, to isolate himself is strong. It shouldn't be that powerful; he's had years to work on it, to fight the instinct urging him to make himself invisible. He should have grown out of it, but here he is, fitted into a corner all by himself as John commands the microphone in an attempt to liven up the room. And while it still makes him smile because it's *John*, it also makes him aware of how many of their men's eyes shoot to him in order to check if *he's* having a good time with it, too. Even though Douglass is palming his face in distress and Kidd is wincing in his seat, they still turn to him as if to say *this? This is for you and you're responsible for it.*

He's not sure he wants to be responsible for John Egan anymore. Not if it's going to leave him feeling tilted and dizzy and *confused.* It almost seems like they're all waiting for him to rein the other in, to put him in his place when he's not exactly John's keeper. If Bucky wanted to drink, dance and sing all through the night, then Buck wouldn't be able to do anything about it. And he seems to *really* want to tonight.

Mail days were always tricky like that.

He'd gotten another letter from Marge that morning and it had been so good hearing from her again, smelling the floral scent of her perfume, it had come like a cherry on top after a mission well done.

I hope you're keeping well, she'd written, *and that the both of you are staying out of trouble!*

It's considerate how she always includes John in the letters she writes him. Like she knows how much of his day is usually taken up by the other, like she knows that Bucky will insert himself in Gale's schedule and that he'll eventually just end up writing to her about him anyway.

He had tried to remember his last letter, tried to remember what he'd said but all that came to him in that moment was *I wish Bucky was flying with us, it's where he belongs.* Because nothing in his life happens without John being there in some way and this has become startlingly obvious to him only recently. Which, in retrospect, isn't anything to

write home about. He's supposed to be smarter, sharper than this, more *observant*. But John Egan had somehow always occupied his blind spots. He used to think that the other was protecting them for him, watching his back, but he's beginning to see that John had instead been using them to hoard all his attention.

And that's not of any fault of John's, no. Gale would never think to blame the other for his own shortcomings.

I'm sure you'll have it all sorted out by the time this letter reaches you! You must miss flying with Bucky something fierce, I know how much – something crossed out as if written in a hurry and then like she'd thought better of it – *fun you two always had together.*

He'd stared at the scribbled lines making the text impossible to read for a good half hour before giving up on trying to decipher them. She obviously didn't want him to know and he could respect that, he didn't have to know (no matter how much he was itching to). She'd written about her mother and her best friend that's getting married, about the crop of corn her family kept, mundane things that mean nothing to him but help anyway. The sense of normalcy that the letters afford him is a hot commodity in the 100th.

She'd finished the letter off with a neat little *Yours, Marge.* And then down below, *PS: Tell Bucky he should write me sometimes, too! I know he has some choice words that he'd like to share with me and I would very much like to read them.*

It had been an odd thing for her to request and it had made him frown a little. Surely, his best friend writing to his best girl back home would be weird, no? But John never writes to anyone, and nobody ever writes to him, so maybe this would be good for him. Marge is not one to say things she doesn't mean, so she must really want John to write to her. The idea, however, had put him off a little. And he wasn't jealous, no, he knows Bucky would never overstep, *but.*

He hadn't brought it up with the other. Hadn't found the right time to and instead ended up overthinking it until they had to run drills after lunchtime.

And he's still thinking on it now as Brady wrestles the mic out of John's hands and sends him to the bar for another drink instead.

"I don't know how you can stand the wailing," Jack grunts and Gale is suddenly very *tired* of everyone's company except John's. He doesn't grace the other with an answer and heads for Bucky, intent on

ignoring both his own discomfort and the eyes of those around them.

He leans against the counter and lets John buy him a coke, the fizz of the glass bottle opening drowned out by the song. He takes a sip and turns to observe the room, finds Bucky's eyes trained on Lil and Dye again. The idea of John being jealous of the two nestled under his ribs uncomfortably, making him frown. He hadn't known that John had cared so much for her so he doubts that's the reason for his intent stare, but it still rankles him a little.

The phone call from Curt comes in and distracts the both of them from any possible conversation that Gale would have wanted to have with him about the topic. Instead, he grin as Curt tries to explain where he is, Bucky hovering next to him and trying to catch the other's voice.

"We're missing you at the party, Curt!" John's whine is loud enough that the other hears and Biddick tutts into the phone.

"I'm sure you can keep ya'selves occupied!" The other shouts back and Gale winces at the loudness of it. Then quieter, he clears his throat. "I wanted to thank you, the both of you. For saving our asses. Mean it."

He swallows heavily, there's not much he can say. He's not one to sing his own praises and he knows John isn't either. They were doing their jobs, making sure their men made it back safe and sound. Cutting the number of losses down to a minimum. He didn't need to be thanked for that.

"You just get back here soon, Curt." He settles on saying instead and John shouts over his shoulder about how he misses the other pilot.

"John says he misses his little spoon," The grin is easy and even as Bucky rolls his eyes and pushes at him, Gale's happy to have alleviated some of the tension in his shoulders with the joke.

"Hey, I'm the big spoon. You should know that by now, Buck!" Biddick chortles from the other side of the line and both Veal and Crank crack up as Bucky throws in an *It's gonna be cold tonight, Curt!* He hangs up, nothing else left to say and meets eyes with the other.

They're squinted and a little glazed but he's not as drunk as Buck had originally assumed. He's playing it up, for what reason, he doesn't know. He should say something, maybe reassure him about Curt being back before they know it but it's – it sounds hollow even in the confines of his own mind. There are no guarantees in war. John's gaze flickers over his features, tightens some at the corners before he turns

to once again stare out at the people dancing.

The ensuing bike race only solidifies the fact that John's not drunk despite the whiskey he'd downed in Buck's vicinity. He's too steady even if his larger frame is a little slow. Buck would bet anything the other could fly a plane no problem right now. The race gets interrupted by the air raid siren and the adrenaline of a near-victory and a dirty scrap on the ground gets forgotten in their rush to get to safety.

"Could be us next." He says as they watch the skies light up above Norwich.

"Mm," Bucky shakes his head almost imperceptibly. "We're getting through this."

The heavy sigh that is building up in his chest is world-weary and befitting of someone older than he is, but John's words just seem to egg it on.

"Says the gambler."

"Well, if I'm gonna bet on anything, I'm gonna bet on us, Buck."

And there's that thing that John likes to do again, *the betting.* The sentence rings familiar, a parallel tune to *only two pilots in the air* and much as those words had left a bad taste in Gale's mouth, so do these. The unfounded confidence, the arrogance of believing they were somehow exempt from the horrors of war. The sentiment so obviously positive but dragging a knife through Gale's guts anyway.

"You sound like my dad, John." Is what makes it out of him instead of the many other deprecating renditions of *you don't know what you're talking about.* So instead of making some stupid attempt at changing the topic, he tells him. Tells him about the drinking, the gambling, the way his dad would always insist that they were just down on their luck for the day, that the *next big win* was on the horizon. Guts himself raw outside of the shelter, voice hushed enough to be ignored by the others but still undeniably surrounded by their men.

Leaning against his wrist and ignoring how the toothpick in his mouth bites into his cheek, he lets the sigh out. "He was always looking for a shortcut."

John sucks in a sharp breath and nods to himself. "'S why you don't like sports, Buck."

He doesn't know why he'd ever doubted Bucky. Curses himself for thinking for a moment that the other would see him differently if he shared this with him. No, not John Egan, taciturn as he may be, he'd never let Buck down.

"That may be." He smiles, grateful beyond words for how easily the other had accepted this new information, for how much he'd said with so little. John's sentiments may be foolish and boasting but his heart's always been in the right place.

The flak fire and the raid eventually stop, the men and women filing out any going home, night sufficiently put to a close. He stretches, twisting at the waist, knee a little sore from the dive he took off his bike earlier, and catches sight of John trying to say something to Lil' awkwardly. The conversation doesn't last long and it ends, surprisingly, with her smacking a fist into the middle of his chest. Gale jolts in their direction, ready to step in, but she's already rushing away in a flurry of polka dots. The punch hadn't been enough to sway John but he still looks grim regardless.

"What was that all about?"

"I, uh, might've overstepped." Bucky runs a hand through his sweaty curls and Gale watches as one makes it out of the mess to droop by its lonesome over his forehead. *He's handsome,* it comes unbridled from the depths of his mind. He stomps on that train of thought before it can even leave the station.

"I didn't know you cared about her so much," He clears his throat.

"I don't," John slumps down into the dewy grass and Buck crouches next to him, keeping their conversation private.

"Then why are you on their case? Should know to leave well enough alone." He doesn't like feeling like he's preaching but with John, it's hard to know what'll finally get through to him. One day it's a barely-funny joke, the other it's some profound comparison Buck scrounges up from his own experiences. Usually, he's good at knowing, but Bucky's been a little hard to read lately.

Or maybe it's that Gale's finally realized they've been speaking in different accents all along.

"Jesus, Buck!" John bursts out – preaching wasn't the right choice for tonight. "I don't give a shit if Dye sticks his dick in Lil' or any other fucking skirt on base!"

“John.” He warns, smacking him on the shoulder to try and keep him quiet. “Lower your damn voice.”

“I don’t give two fucks about them or Douglass and that red cross bird, or whatever the hell’s going on with Croz and Bubbles and Croz’s wife!”

He blinks a little at the last one but ignores it – it’s none of his business, he doesn’t want to know. John, *however*, makes it a point of being Gale’s business so now he gets the privilege of dealing with him – as everyone’s been expecting and implying the entire night.

“You sure haven’t been actin’ like it.” Buck’s memory is perfectly fine and he can recall, with decent clarity, at least a dozen interactions in which John had been a dick to either Lil’ or Dye who were just enjoying their time together.

“I don’t-” Hands fisted in the grass, the other pulls a few of the clumps out and tosses them onto the road in front of them. He’s frustrated, that much is evident, but Buck also thinks that John might be *sad*.

“Did you know that I never get mail?”

Ah. Mail days were always fickle.

He sits down despite the dew and the dirt, leans against the other pilot for support.

“I know,” He confirms, tone low.

“I never write it either. Maybe that’s why, but.” He drops onto the ground, staring up into the vast sky above. “My mom don’t care. Sister’s got a family of her own. Dad’s in the ground. And I sure as hell don’t got a sweetheart back home. So I thought-” There’s a choked off noise that makes Buck look down at him and he – Bucky’s got tears in his eyes that make Gale feel like he’s gargling acid.

He wants to reach out, to wipe the escaped ones away, to tuck them in his pocket and shelter them from anyone else who might be bearing witness. Bucky shouldn’t be crying, he shouldn’t be heaving like his chest is collapsing. Gale hurriedly shuffles closer, knees pressed into his hip and a hand resting against the other’s sternum.

“Breathe, Bucky.” He reminds him and the other sucks in air like he’s drowning.

“I thought if I could find a nice girl here – find someone to come back to but, but I’m not.” John’s voice hiccups on his next breath and Gale winces at how rough it sounds. “’m not the type a dame wants to keep around.”

“Marge said you should write to her.” He blurts out before Bucky can spiral any further. It works in pausing the other’s shuddering momentarily, his gaze zeroing in on Buck instead. “Said it in the letter this mornin’. I was waiting to talk to you about it but. Now seems like it’s a good time as any.”

“Why-” Bucky sits up, mouth tugging down in confusion. “Why would she offer that? I mean, don’t get me wrong, we’re friends by association and all, but…”

He shrugs because he doesn’t really have a good answer for that, seeing as he doesn’t know why that’d be either. “I don’t know. Reckon she wants to gossip with you about the boys an’ me. Knows you’re the best source on base.”

The words make John smile, if only a little. “She’s right on that front.”

“The offer’s genuine,” He reassures. “Wouldn’t have made it otherwise.”

John’s quiet for a couple of minutes and Gale follows suit, letting the crickets and the wind rustling the trees fill the air between them.

“And you wouldn’t mind?” Bucky eventually asks, tentative.

Strange enough, with Marge he doesn’t think he’d feel differently about it than if he, himself, were writing John a letter.

“Course not. She offered, don’t see why you shouldn’t take her up on it.” He shrugs, leaning back onto his hands and away from John, suddenly a little too aware of their proximity. “And, uh, you need to apologize to Lil’.”

Bucky sighs and rolls his eyes, “Yeah, I know.”

“And if you’re feeling like this again, for fuck’s sake, John. Just talk to me.” He says firmly because he believes that this is the best option they’ve got, that this is what he can do to help.

He’s responsible for John Egan not because the men expect it of him as the calmer of the two, not because Bucky can’t take care of himself,

no. He's firmly in John Egan's corner because that's where he planted himself, that's where he wants to be. Every other confusing thing swirling inside him subsides in that moment, leaving room for his decision to take root. If he can help, he *will* help.

"Come on, you'll catch your death down there." He stands up and dusts his slacks off before offering a hand to John.

The other hauls himself off the ground and instead of standing on his own two feet, he folds his tall frame into Buck's chest, hugging his waist firmly. Gale's chest seizes with the sudden onslaught of warmth and his hands flail before settling on the other's upper back. Bucky's shivering a little, trembling like a newborn foal so Gale keeps his hold steady.

It's him that starts them off in a slow sway this time, compelled by his own thundering heartbeat. They make a few languid circles on the spot before Bucky stops them with one final squeeze and pulls away – has to, lest he do something stupid like, run his fingers through John's curls.

"Let's get you to bed, John." He grips the other's wrist and starts tugging him in the right direction.

"You gonna tuck me in, too, Buck?"

"Only if you're a good boy," He quips and enjoys how the other chokes on a laugh a little too much, perhaps.

It takes a few days of Bucky sulking about on base, looking over his shoulder like he's expecting to be jumped, before Buck finally decided to corner him about it. The other had been acting more reserved, calmer but in a way where he's strung out instead of relaxed, and it's been getting on Gale's nerves. Seeing Bucky so twitchy is disconcerting, it's making Gale want to compensate, makes *him* chattier instead. And when Bucky shyly dodges away from a companionable arm thrown over his shoulder, Buck takes him by the wrist and frog marches him away from the barracks for a talk.

"Alright, spill it." He stares John down, hands on his hips as the other fidgets with his wristwatch.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you think I'm stupid, John?" He hisses, "Or blind for that

matter?"

"Buck," The other takes his cap off and runs a hand through his hair.

"Don't *Buck* me, tell me what it is so that we can fix it. You're not going up in a Fort with whatever this is on your shoulders." He demands firmly, seeing no other way of dealing with John when he's like this.

"It's about, uh, the other day." Bucky leans against the wall of the building they're standing behind.

"Lil' and Dye again?" He approaches the other tentatively, putting himself in front of John to make sure he won't bolt, making himself the only thing in John's view.

"No, no. About the mail thing," John gnaws at his bottom lip, drawing Gale's eyes to it with the motion. He leaves it worried raw when he finally continues and Buck gets the odd urge to soothe it, to *touch*. "About writing to Marge."

"Ah."

It makes sense, he supposes, that Bucky would be actin' weird about that. It makes sense that he'd overthink the idea now that he was sober. After all, it's not every day your best friend's sweetheart offers to write to you. Even if Marge's intention are entirely selfless and kind, John isn't the type to do things like this thoughtlessly.

"I – I wrote the letter." John admits, hand patting the inside pocket of his god-awful cream sheepskin.

"You did?" It comes out sounding a little disbelieving so he clears his throat, not wanting to make the other feel bad about it. "That's good, John."

"Wrote it yesterday," He takes the letter out. It's already neatly set into an envelope, the address written on it and a stamp in the corner. Gale notes that it's not sealed. "Wanted to – I don't know. Confirm that it's alright if I mail it? Ask if you wanted to read it ahead of time or something."

"Bucky," He shakes his head, pushing the letter away from where the other's offering it to him. "I don't need to read it. What you write to Marge about is your business, I trust you."

The other stares at him, eyes wide and so damn blue where they're catching the sun's rays.

"I can mail it with mine if you'd like." He offers with a smile and John nods, handing him the envelope to seal.

"Thank you, Buck, really." The other's shoulders drop as the tension leaves them. Gale notes that he looks tired even if it's barely after lunchtime. This must have been weighing on him heavily over the last few days.

"Hope your letters are at least more entertaining than mine," He pats the other's shoulder and Bucky surprises him by catching him in a hug as if this is something they do all the time – and not just when Bucky's three sheets to the wind. They sway a little but it's not the kind that he's begun ascribing to *dancing with John Egan*. Still, it's nice. It's so nice, in fact, that Gale has to break away and center himself, put some distance between them for propriety's sake.

He meets John's eyes and realizes that the other hasn't had a lick of alcohol today, meaning that whatever this hug was, was entirely due to Bucky just *wanting* to do it. No clinginess excused by the drink, no emotionally charged conversations fueled by loneliness. John had embraced him so fiercely because he wanted him in his arms. His gut clenches so alarmingly hard that he has to fight down a physical wince.

"Looking forward to the next mail day, Buck." John's eyes squint as he smiles, the blue almost disappearing with it and it's enough to make him a feel winded.

He nods, throat feeling tight and mouth dry. "It'll be here soon enough."

That night he sits down to write to Marge as well.

By now, you know that John's taken you up on your offer and written you a letter of his own. He pens down, knee jumping as he tries to focus. *I know he's already going to sing your praises, but I want to thank you as well.*

He thinks about their conversation, about how John had sounded when he'd admitted to wanting someone to write to, someone to come home to. He gets it, he does. But it also – it's never been about that for Gale. He has Marge who sends him her perfumed letters but she's halfway across the world - he's not exactly coming home to her. The

closest he gets to that particular feeling is when he's flying a mission and John's staying on base or vice versa. And when they're both flying, then he has all he needs up in the air with him.

Mom and dad, Curtis would say, *cat and dog, same thing.*

He bites at the nail on his thumb and wonders if there is truth to that. The thought brings heat to his cheeks, making him feel young and stupid for letting his emotions get the better of him. He feels *juvenile* and the feeling doesn't subside no matter how many times he recites his own rank back to himself. Major Gale Cleven is still only twenty-four years old, after all.

I think this will be good for him, God knows he has plenty to say. He tries to keep his handwriting neat but his hand is sweating. *Don't believe anything he tells you I did, he's most likely talking about himself.*

He keeps the rest of the letter light, telling Marge about life on base, keeping it purposefully vague because details aren't exactly allowed. He signs it with *Yours, Buck* and doesn't think about it until he's already sealed the letter up and tucked it away with John's.

He stares at the identical envelopes, the stamp and the address the same. Except one is written in chicken-scratch that belongs to Bucky, the familiar words in an even more familiar writing. He runs a thumb over the curled *y* in *Wyoming* and suppresses the shiver racing down his spine. He wants to take John there once, he realizes, wants to show him the ranches and teach him how to ride. It's a silly wish, something that depends solely on whether or not they live through the war. It's not something he should be thinking about, not if he wants to keep a level head.

But his heart doesn't get the memo and he finds himself imagining seeing Bucky out in the open range, a cowboy hat shading his eyes as they make camp under the starry sky until he falls asleep.

376 heavy bombers and 240 fighters for the mission. The moment Gale hears those numbers, he knows that whatever target Harding is about announce is going to be a big one.

"That's the largest air armada assembled in the history of mankind." Harding boasts and the men echo his sentiment with a cheer that fills out the room. They're all excited to make a difference, even John is clapping next to him, but somehow, Gale can't say that he feels the same. It's hardly a noble thing, this job of theirs, and he has other

things on his mind at the moment as ill-advised as that is.

Things like the letter he'd received from Marge and the one John had gotten yesterday as well.

The other had made a whole deal about it. Shoved it in Buck's face and grinned so wide and happy, he'd almost forgotten they were set to fly the next morning. He had rushed to read through it, opening it carefully even in his hurry, and left Gale to his mail. His own letter had been standard; news about the crop, the cat that had kittens underneath Marge's porch, how his ma' and Marge's best friend, Irene, were doing, little to no fanfare. Mundane as always. And he had been happy with it, had brought it to his nose to take in the perfume like he usually would.

Gale had been enjoying the moment until he happened to look over at John and had seen such heart-breaking sadness in his sardonic smile that he'd immediately forgotten all about the paper in his hands. He had rushed to the other's side but John had dodged away, folding the letter in half and hiding it from Gale's view.

They had stared at each other, challengingly and stubbornly until John's expression had finally cleared, chased away with a hearty chuckle.

'She says she liked the gossip', John had stated as if that explained why Gale had felt the urge to almost brain himself on a bedpost trying to get over to him fast enough. Worst of all: that had been that. John had tucked the letter away with his other important possessions and Gale had stared him down until the both of them were called to join their friends for dinner. All throughout their meal, Buck had thought about what she could have possibly written in that damn note and had come up with nothing out of the ordinary. At least, nothing that could affect John so much.

He's still thinking about it now, even when he knows he should be writing information down.

Regensburg, an engine assembly plant, yadda, yadda, yadda – *what the hell was in that damned letter?*

"Uh, Major. Why does that line go all the way down to Africa?" Curt's voice brings him out of it and his vision clears up enough to focus on the map properly.

"That is a characteristically astute question, Curt." The Major smirks,

a little too self-satisfied for Gale's liking and the rest of the room shares a laugh on Biddick's account.

"We drew the shitty end of the stick," The Major continues to elaborate on their *ingenious* plan which involves taking heavy fire, clearing a path and then booking it for Africa. It's a lot of flight time over occupied territory being tail-end Charlie again. Bucky gets assigned reserve command pilot and Gale shares a look with the man in question and Crank whose Fort Bucky's going to be flying in. It's a tacked-on, made-up position just to keep John in the game and they all know it.

"You had nothing to do with it?" He raises an eyebrow, jaw ticking. John's mouth curls at the corners where he can't keep it steady as he says *what?* all innocent-like.

John dodges him on their way to suiting up. It's most likely that he knows Buck will try and get him to fess up about his new job on Cruikshank's crew, and isn't keen on doing so. He leaves it for now, goes with the motions of getting into his gear and waiting for the trucks to pick them up instead.

Soup, they'd called it that first mission, all those months ago. Soup, is right. Gale can't see more than three feet in front of him and the fog doesn't look like it's going to be clearing up anytime soon. He listens to the priest read his prayers to the few men assembled under the B-17's wing, wondering if it brings them peace of mind imagining some transcendental being looking out for them. A thirty minute delay could screw over the entire mission, and yet there is no lifting off in this weather.

A baseball rolls to his feet from the direction of DeMarco's Fort and Meatball's claws skitter across the tarmac as he chases after it. He's about to try and get the dog to keep him company when Curt finds him. He tosses the ball back and watches Meatball run after it, unconcerned with man's burdens or the heavy atmosphere on the runway.

"Hey, Buck." Biddick sidles up to him, hands tucked under his vest. "Some soup, huh?"

"Mm," He nods, still staring out and only seeing faint traces of the other crews in the distance. "How're your boys doing?"

"Antsy," Curt hums, "Not me, though, I'm feeling good. This could be a big one."

“It is,” He confirms even though he doesn’t like Curt saying it out loud. He’s not superstitious as has been proven over and over again by his vehement denial of all things *luck-related,* but something makes him want to stop the other from speaking. He wants to put his hand over Curt’s mouth and keep him silent for a little while. At least on this topic.

“I think we could do some real damage.” The other peers up at him like he’s expecting Buck to say or do *something*. He doesn’t know what it is, though. Out of everyone, he’s always had the most trouble reading Curt. It’s mostly because he’s never needed to. Biddick would hardly hold his tongue, not one to lie or obfuscate the truth. He’d tell anybody who’ll listen what his honest opinion is, so when he’s like this, Buck doesn’t know what to think.

“Saw Bucky get mail yesterday.” The other finally cracks and Gale forces the instinctive smile down, remaining as stoic as they’re all used to seeing him.

“He did, yes.”

“Funny, though.” Curt rocks back and forth on his feet, “The handwriting on the envelope looked real familiar.”

“He wrote to Marge recently,” Clearing his throat, he pushes past the discomfort of sharing something private with someone else. “She said she wanted to hear from Bucky so I thought it’d be good for him.”

Curt whistles lowly, pursing his lips. “*Auntie* Marge.”

A huffed laugh escapes him without permission, “Is that where she fits into your little family unit?”

“Oh, for sure.” The other pilot drawls. “Not biologically related, ‘course, but she’s still there for all the big events. Like Christmas, or Mardi Gras.”

He grins, shaking his head in amusement. Leave it to Curt to continue building upon a joke even if it was never really funny in the first place.

“You’re from a big family, right?” He nudges the other with his shoulder and Curt offers him a piece of gum that he takes gratefully.

“Sure am,” The other holds up a hand and starts listing off the members. “Ma’ and pa’, younger sister, older sister, grandma an’ me.”

He's one finger short but Gale won't fault him for it. "And that's just in the one house. We're scattered all over the States. Holidays are a nightmare with all the cousins and their spawn."

He can't imagine what a full house would be like, what having anyone other than his dad and his dog in the place would look like. It would have probably been less lonely, less isolating. He'd gotten a taste of it once he'd started seeing Marge long-term, her house always bustling with people, be it friends or family. But having it like that full time, he's not sure how he'd manage.

"Must've been crowded."

"Made getting used to the military life easy, though." Curt's smile is wide and careless like they're not preparing for the biggest mission they've ever flown. There's something in his eyes, though. It's easy conversation and yet he can't help but think that there's something Curt's not telling him.

"Out with it," He sighs eventually and Biddick pouts up at him as if Gale's spoiling all his fun.

"'S very kind of you to let John write to your best girl." The other grins like he *knows* his words will rattle Gale.

"Is it weird?" He skips through all the questions he wants to ask like *should I be worried* or *do you think she'll like writing to John more than to me*.

"I dunno," Curt shrugs. "What are your esteemed feelings on the topic?"

He huffs, shifting on his feet, restless. "*It could be good for him*."

"You don't sound sure, Buck." Biddick's always been the one to needle, always seeking more information always wanting to know things. He bets that's how he got John to tell him about who the letter was from, too.

"We'll see," He sighs, remembering the expression the other had made once he had finally gotten through what was written in it.

"Not your responsibility to keep 'im happy, you know." Curt rolls his eyes, putting his whole body into the motion.

His eyebrows shoot up into his hairline in surprise. This is the first

he's hearing *that* particular sentiment.

"He's my best friend, Curt. Course I'll try to if I can." The defensive feeling rises up from within him again, making him itch and making him want to pull rank in order to get Curt to behave. He never would, least of all when talking to Biddick, but the urge is still there.

"You two are sweet," Curtis pats his back and looks over his shoulder as if checking if someone's there. "*Friendships*, ah, like that are worth keeping."

Gale doesn't – he doesn't necessarily know what to say to that so he just nods, acknowledging without words.

"Well, better get back to the ant farm." The other sniffles, giving him another pat on the back. "I'll see you in Algeria, Buck."

"See you there, Curt."

The pit in his stomach that's been collapsing in on itself the entire morning widens, making it a yawning chasm. He's always trusted his gut, always done what it told him to. They shouldn't be doing this but as he watches the other walk away, he knows there's no other choice but to go up and do their duty.

He felt the impact of the first rocket in his bones, it rocked the very core of his being, made his life flash before his eyes but there had been no time to ruminate on time spent laughing with Marge, shooting the shit with John, or getting his drunk father out of smoky parlors. Claytor, gone. Hummel, gone. The whole second element, gone in a matter of mere moments.

The moment waist informs him that Biddick's been hit, Gale knows that this is it. The yawning chasm fills with bile that's threatening to rush up his esophagus. Nobody says anything about any chutes. Nobody dares breathe as they focus on staying alive.

He watches, awash in cold sweat, as Forts start dropping out of the sky like flies. He loses count quickly and gets distracted by the heavy fire they take, by the leak they spring.

They stick the mission out despite Friedkin urging them to bail. The factory is gone, levelled with the ground, the Luftwaffe refueling.

His voice is hoarse from screaming orders by the time they see the

shores of Africa. His throat parched and his eyes dry from barely blinking lest he miss something. His hands are clenched against cold collumn in his grip so hard that his joints have started to cramp.

“That’s the airstrip, due south.” Friedkin points out like they’re not all watching it grow bigger the lower their Fort drops. It’s too far still and they need to compensate so he does what he has to. They feather all four engines engines, letting the Fort glide, leaving it to the mercy of the air. *No-engine Cleven.*

The Fort stops in the sand, not making it to the tarmac but landing safely still. They sit in silence, breathing heavily as they take in the fact that they made it. The adrenaline is coursing through him, making his mind foggy and all he can do is huff out a disbelieving laugh while the dust settles.

John’s already there with Kidd once they start disembarking from the Fort. He watches them shuffle the injured to the car for easier transport and feels the bile subside for now.

“I don’t know how you made it all the way to Africa but couldn’t make the runway,” John’s tone is jovial, not matching the seriousness of the situation. “It’s right there.”

“I lost four Forts.” He grinds out through clenched teeth, the joy of landing safely having quickly evaporated, leaving only regret. “How many of us made it?”

“Eleven out of 21 Forts.” John turns to look at the setting sun and Gale follows, dizzy with the events of the day, a headache steadily numbing the front of his brain. “You see any chutes when Claytor went down?”

“I – I don’t know.” He’d been informed of the Fort getting hit, of it dragging left but he doesn’t – he can’t remember a damn thing. There’s nothing there and he digs and he digs, but all he can come up with is the image of the fighters flying loops around them and Forts going down one after another in front of his very eyes.

“What about Curt?” John tries again and a sharp jolt of pain lances through Gale’s chest, shooting straight down into his knees and almost taking his legs out from under him.

“I can’t remember,” He admits, aware of how shaken he must look, how unsteady.

John tries making a joke out of it, tries playing it off but Buck's not listening. *Curt's gone.* He knows it as well as he knows that despite everything, the sun will rise in the morning, the Earth will keep spinning and that he'll die one day, too.

John grips his shoulders and turns them towards each other, a fierce look in his eyes. He stares back at him, deadpan and unseeing.

"We're gonna get through this. You hear me? Don't you stop believing that." John's gaze flickers over his features, watching him in turn.

"Sure, Bucky." He demurs because it's easier than admitting that he doesn't believe the other. For the first time since he's known him, he thinks Bucky might be lying to him. And for the first time since they've become friends, he wishes John would leave him alone.

The Algeria airfield is hardly more than the runway and some metal barrels laying around so they're forced to use their Forts for shelter from the sun. Being from Wyoming, he's used a cooler year-round climate and not even the Texan heat could have prepared him for the likes of Africa.

It's not only warm out, it's *sweltering.* The heat and the dry air making a home in his lungs that have him and some of the other men coughing through the night. It's salt on an open wound – they've lost so many of their fellow soldiers and now they're stuck here, waiting for the 12th to reach them. Grounded for at least a few more days.

The first night he doesn't sleep a wink. Too busy spinning with the reality of loss, too distracted choking on his grief to even think about closing his eyes. He's exhausted come morning and John's looking at him like he know exactly how little rest he got. Like he'd gotten almost the same amount.

That day drags on and on and he feels like he's going to vomit if he takes in anything other than water, so he secludes himself inside Crank's Fort and waits for the nausea to pass. He hasn't talked to John since they landed, hasn't talked much at all outside of barked orders and clipped greetings. He doesn't think he has much left to say, not after that shit-show of a mission. They'd done their due, completed what they were sent out for but the cost was too high, the price paid in blood. *Curt's* blood. Every time he remembers, it opens up that void in him again. There is no such thing as luck, but by *God* does it seem like they're shit out of it sometimes.

He tries remembering if he'd seen parachutes over and over again but there's nothing in his head. Just his conversation with Curt before the mission, a grinning face saying *see you in Algeria, Buck,* and then nothing until they'd touched down and he'd seen John walking towards him. It's frustrating, it's *unfair.* Buck had lived to tell the tale but there was nothing to tell, because he can't fucking wrap his mind around what happened.

He eventually passes out inside the plane, too tired to keep fighting off the nightmares.

Day two goes about the same, except Bucky finds him and drags him out of the B-17, muttering something about *overheating* all the while. The tin can of a plane had begun feeling a little like an oven but he'd been too out of it with sleep to move as the sun rose in the sky.

"Buck," John rarely uses that tone with him, is rarely serious long enough for it to get to that point.

He stands to attention, tilting his head. "Bucky."

"Buck, I need you to get a grip." The other ushers him towards the jeep. "I need you to take whatever you're feeling right now. Bottle it up. And bury it out here in the sand."

He jolts, steps stuttering before he continues walking, because that is *not* something he would have expected from John. John, who's usually so candid and honest with him, so oddly gentle in his approach because he knows he can be. Sure, Bucky had cussed him out plenty over the years, but this is – this is something else entirely.

"I know you're grieving," The other's hands clench on the steering wheel as he takes them away from the strip and towards the nearest town. "I know it hurts like hell. But the men need you. They need you to be alright."

"I can't just-" He chokes, the words getting stuck behind clenched teeth.

"You can." John hisses, speeding the car up. "You can and you have to. There'll be time to mourn once we win this damn war. But for now, we're here even if the others are not, and we have to fight in their honor, too. I need you to be alright."

He leans his forehead against the dashboard, sucking in a dusty breath. John's right. He knows that John's right but it's going to take

some time. It's going to take him a while to put this all away into a box to be opened at a later date, to bury it. He admires how resilient John appears in that moment, even though Gale can read the tension in his shoulders, the lines on his face, and that they all spell grief as well.

"I'm gonna miss him, John." He mumbles, barely audible over the rumble of the jeep.

"I know," Bucky reaches over and puts a wide palm over the back of his sweaty neck, squeezing. The skin on skin contact sends sparks skittering down his spine and he shudders. "Curt was a good friend, a good guy."

"Even with this mission looming over us, he was still worried about you, you know?" He straightens up, trapping John's hand between the seat and his damp back. The fingers dig into his skin and he fights back a groan as John's thumb finds a knot somewhere under his shoulder blade.

"Yeah?"

The shape of the town makes itself known in the distance, low buildings with none standing out particularly, almost blending in with the sand around them.

"Was askin' about the letter Marge sent." It's easier to talk about Curt like this, like he's still here but not really. It makes it more palatable to know that they'll all remember him fondly for as long as they live.

John extracts his hand and brings it back to the wheel. "Yeah, he was real curious about it."

He's not going to pry, not now. Even if the other's tone has shifted some, he's not going to try and drag it out of John. He doesn't have the mental fortitude for it, the will to argue. He just nods and sits back for the ride, enjoying the breeze generate by the car speeding down the dirt road.

The town is barely more than two streets filled with fearful inhabitants. They eye the two Americans warily but Bucky seems to know where he needs to go. He watches as the other barters with the man at the market in stilted French, managing to get them a few more canisters of water for the boys and – and a red fez for himself to wear.

Gale palms at his face once John puts it on, at a loss for words.

“Why? Just… why?”

“Sunstroke.” The other shrugs and Gale gives up the good fight, not wanting to question the other’s motives further.

They drive in silence that is entirely of Gale’s own making. He’s not being fair to the other, but he – he needs time.

We need you, was Bucky’s sentiment. *I need you,* he’d said. Buck’s getting real tired of being needed, of being so tightly wound all the time.

Sometimes he thinks that he hates John, just a little. Sometimes he thinks that John has it so easy, easier than the rest of them. He can drink as much as he wants, he can gamble away his earthly possessions, he can fuck to his heart’s content and he can spend all the money in the world on some stupid whim of his and not give a single damn about it. He can do all of that and just be *alright,* can go about his business as usual, like nothing’s wrong at all and there’s no war to fight in the morning.

But he knows that’s not true because he knows John like the back of his hand, knows him in the quiet moments and under the twinkling stars.

John gets up from where he’d been trying to sleep and Gale watches him set off on foot. He follows, a moth to a flame, making sure not to rouse the men next to him.

The night is so silent and empty, the sand shifting under his shoes too loud, to abrasive as he walks behind Bucky. He keeps his distance and watches the way the other folds into himself the longer they go on. Gale knows that Bucky’s aware of him following as certainly as he knows that there’s no real hate in his heart for the other. That there is only envy.

Because John clings to life, to the smallest pieces of happiness that he can, while Gale only strives to survive. He’s *stoic*, he’s *composed*, he’s in charge because that’s what people expect of him. Because that is the mold he’d fit himself into from the start. The thing is that – that he had no other choice. This is what he’s had to be for his entire life, this is how he’d raised himself to be. A childhood that wasn’t kind; that shaped him and forced him to adjust – *too grown up for a kid, too childish to be an adult*.

He was stoic because being too loud, too emotional would mean

trouble. He was composed because panic didn't help when you're left alone in a room full of drunks, trying to find your father and drag him home. He was trusted to be in charge because his mother was bed-ridden for so long that he'd ended up taking over cooking and cleaning, taking care of the animals. The mold a tight fit, the wrong shape for a kid but he'd forced himself into it anyway, *responsible.*

There's always been someone that needed him and he'd seen what avoiding that responsibility could lead to. So he'd made sure that he had his own tenets; that he'd never stray from them. As set in stone as *thou shalt have no other gods before me, thou shalt not kill, steal, commit adultery* are to the religious folk, so are *do not drink, gamble, fuck around, avoid your responsibilities* to him. A thankless set of rules that have left him with only the gaping void in his chest where his heart should be.

He doesn't hate John, he never could. No matter how many times he wishes he did, no matter the amount of envy coursing through his veins. John's the only light spot in his life, the only thing he can cling to as much as it clings back at him. The men may need him but he needs John. The other has made himself as indispensable as the air in his lungs and Buck can't blame him. Feels it echoed even.

John stops once they can no longer see the Forts at their backs. He turns to Gale, hands on his hips and tears in his eyes, waiting for him to approach.

He expects the embrace this time, expects the strong arms around him, gripping and refusing to budge. The night is cool but John's a heater against his own chilled frame. The other sobs into the side of his neck and Gale lets his own tears come. He starts swaying them, hushes John even as he chokes back his cries. There is no one out here to see them, no one to bear witness to the breaking of their composures. John's legs give out and he takes the both of them down into the sand. The impact is harsh but the bruises the other's fingers are digging into his back hurt more prominently. It's a good kind of pain, grounding.

"I'm sorry," Bucky whispers after some time and Gale shakes his head.

"You were right." He inhales deeply, getting his breathing back in order. He dares to bring a hand up to run through loose curls, just like he's thought about doing the last few times they were this close.

"Could've been nicer about it," The other sighs, nose pressed to his

throat firmly and making Gale's chest stutter on his next exhale.

"I needed to hear it." He persists; he's not letting Bucky beat himself up over this, over something that will help them all eventually. "Needed it from you."

John pauses at that, hands moving down until he's gripping Gale's waist instead of his back. He's suddenly startlingly aware of how twined they are; legs crossed, he's almost in Bucky's lap.

"Too good for me, Gale." The other mumbles and he feels his cheeks flush.

"Don't be stupid, Bucky." He leans away, slowly extracting himself from the other's hold. Except, this is so much worse because now their faces are inches apart and he's forced to bear the entirety of John's weighty stare.

"Just don't quit on me and we'll get through this." The other's tone is pleading, eyes darting over Gale's face.

"Promise. No matter what, it's you an' me." He vows, as serious as the grave, resolute.

Because he can't imagine it any other way, can't think about moving forward if he were to lose John. It's the two of them together, till the end of the road.

And right then and there, he realizes that that's what's wrong with him. That this isn't something one feels for his best friend, no matter how close. This is something a good night's sleep can't fix and he's not entirely sure he wants it to.

He needs to write to Marge.

It's a month later that they get their first crew out of Greenland making the twenty-five runs. It'd almost been a myth among the men, none believing that it could be done and yet there they are. Standing near the control tower and watching as Dye buzzes over it.

Bucky laughs, clapping him on the back. "He stole your move!"

He glances over to where Lil' is jumping with joy at her sweetheart making it back safe and sound. "Stole your girl."

It's become a sort of a joke between them. Anytime they see Lil' and

Dye together, either one would make a snide remark, something teasing, something lighthearted. Usually it would be John who'd pout and whine, making Gale smack him on the back with a *you'll get your sweetheart next time* which would prompt a *I already have all the sugar I need* from John in turn.

There is a party, of course. The celebration lively and grand in Dye's honor, in his crew's. Him and Bucky make their rounds, cheer to the men – ones here and the ones gone. He spends most of the night focusing on keeping Meatball entertained, though, too busy thinking about *the ones gone* to really enjoy it. He knows Bucky's thinking about it too, especially after they meet one of the new crews and Rosenthal approaches them for advice.

It's a celebration but the possibility of death still looms large over them.

"Try to stay alive," He says, leaned against the bar, shoulder brushing up against John's.

"Or at least try and make it to eleven missions!" Bucky chirps and Rosenthal gives a confused noise.

"What happens after that?" It's such an innocent question and Gale winces once John opens his mouth again.

"Well, you either beat the odds, or you didn't." John shrugs and Bucky watches Rosenthal's mood dim, realizing that despite the jovial atmosphere of the party, there is no merriment in their hearts.

Once the younger pilot leaves, Bucky lets out a soft tutt. "All these new crews… once we're gone, ain't nobody gonna remember us."

It's an odd thing to be worried about, not something Gale had thought about, for sure. "What does it matter?"

There's clear distaste on the other's face, obvious even in his side profile where Gale's looking.

"Nothin', I guess."

Harding gives them a speech about being flak-happy, about the doctor being worried about their mental states and Gale can't blame him. There's men here that cry themselves to sleep in their bunks every night, men who shake apart at loud noises and those who wake screaming from nightmares. And yet Harding, in his infinite wisdom,

brushes it all off. It doesn't sit right with him, makes him want to protest.

John calls the Colonel flak-happy himself and the stare down between them has all the men in the vicinity holding their breaths. But Harding takes it in stride, laughing it off even though Gale knows John meant it and would have said more to the bastard if he could have.

"You need a break," He huffs once the men walk off looking for suitable dance partners. "A weekend pass."

"You should come," John hums, finally turning to look at him. He's in a mood tonight, that's been obvious so far. "London. What do you say? We paint the town red."

He can't think of anything worse than sitting around every night and watching John drink, gamble and dance with girls he'll later take to his hotel room.

In light of his revelation on that Algerian sand last month, he'd become somewhat reluctant to indulge John as much as he usually would. He's refused most pub outings the other had tried roping him into, opted to instead stay on base. Which had unfortunately lead to him staying up, waiting for Bucky to come back like he was some sort of housewife with an unruly husband – *mom and dad,* Curt's words haunting him. And when Bucky *would* eventually stumble into the barracks, it was always drunk and stinking of whiskey and perfume, lipstick smeared on his collar, his jaw. He'd collapse into his cot and look at Buck with such wide-eyed surprise before pleading for assistance. Spineless as he is, Gale would give in and help the other out of his clothes. Only when John was safe and sound under the covers could Buck fall asleep, too.

"Maybe next time, Bucky." He smiles tightly and crouches down to press a kiss to Meatball's head. He picks the dog up and sees John smile at them sweetly as he begins swaying with Meatball in his arms, leading them around the room.

"I'm telling Marge, Buck!" John calls and he winks at him despite how his heart clenches at the reminder.

Dear Marge, he'd written her in the last letter. The one he promised himself to pen the moment he reached England again.

I almost didn't make it last mission. It seemed dramatic but it had felt like the right thing to write at the time. Instead of updating her with

business as usual and empty platitudes he'd written her a goodbye.

I don't want you waiting around on me when the future is so uncertain. I want you to have someone safe, to have someone who'll belong to you entirely, wholly. Because, as he's become so incredibly aware, he no longer does. No, he may still love Marge and want her to be happy, *but.*

I hope that you understand, and that you will find it in your heart to forgive me one day so that we can remain friends. He didn't feel good writing it, this cursed letter, but it needed to be done – needed to be said. And while he would have preferred to do this face to face, this is the best he could do.

You're still my family, Marge, but there is a better life out there for you than what I can provide or promise. If you wish for us to stop our correspondence, I will oblige. I only ask that you don't cut John off entirely, too. He had been very happy hearing from you last time.

Bucky had gotten two more letters from Marge since the last one, the mail having been a little more frequent than usual. And he'd lit up like it was Christmas both times, eager to read what Marge had to say. It'd warmed his heart even as the first time, Gale himself hadn't gotten one in return. John had shot him a look and Buck had just shrugged, muttered something about it being held for censorship longer even though he knew not to expect a response right away.

Especially since he'd signed it with a simple but poignant little *Buck* that he hoped would make it clear to her why he was doing this, why he was ending things.

He'd gotten his response the second time, though, and he had felt relieved despite not daring to hope for one in the first place.

My sweet Gale, she'd started the letter off strong enough that it made Gale want to weep.

Your heart's always been too big for just one person to occupy. While I would have waited for you no matter how uncertain the future, I can make an educated guess that this is not something you'd have liked for me to do.

He had laughed a little at that even as tears rushed to his eyes. It was a good sign, after all, that she could still be sarcastic with him, that she could still make light of the situation.

I can admit that this will hurt for a while, but that I would hate losing your

friendship over this as well. My letters may come a little more sporadically from now on, but you should still expect them all the same. And for your information, I would never deny Bucky the outlet for all his gossip, so you don't have to worry about that.

The relief he felt in that moment was akin to making it back to land after a rough mission. It was like taking a breath of fresh air after being stuck behind the yoke for hours on end. She's not mad, she understands *and* she'll keep responding to John. He never doubted Marge's own heart, but he was still afraid.

Much like his own pointed signature, she'd signed the letter with just *Marge.* It was an ending, it was closure he didn't know he needed.

PS: Most of Bucky's gossip is about you.

He sets Meatball down and the dog rushes off to find DeMarco, knocking one of the new pilots to the side in his hurry. When he looks back to the bar, Bucky's mysteriously disappeared. He sighs and wonders if it was a good idea not to tell John about him and Marge. He should have, probably. This is something friends tell each other, right?

He takes the bike out to the hardstands where he can see Bucky's silhouette in the cockpit of Crank's Fort. A little frazzled, he shakes his hands out, suddenly feeling nervous about this conversation. All he needs to do is go in, tell John the news and then leave the other to his own devices. He hoists himself into the Fort and winces as he immediately kicks over a box of *something* in the dark.

"You'll get your Fort back by morning," Bucky calls from behind the yoke and Gale snorts. As if anyone else would put in the effort to seek John out when there's a party going on.

"'S me, John." He shuffles himself up, patting the other's shoulder as he squeezes into his seat which has been left free. It makes him smile, that despite not flying together anymore, John still considers the left side as his, that the instinct is still there.

"Buck," The other hums, "Course it is. No one else is stupid enough to seek me out when I'm poor company."

"Shut up, John." He rolls his eyes and kicks John's foot off from the panel in front of him.

"Hey, you decided to join me." Bucky takes a swig from his flask.

“Grow tired of Meatball? He shed all over your fine clothes?”

“That he did,” He grimaces, looking down at himself to check if he’s gotten all of the dog hair off his uniform. “Ended our little dance and saw you were gone. Wondered where you went.”

“Well, here I am. Congratulations.” John offers him the flask and he waves him off, refusing as usual.

“I always know where to find you,” He twists in the seat, leaning against the curved side of the cockpit so that he can watch John’s profile in the moonlight.

“Mm,” The other nods his head, mouth thinning in a pensive sort of expression. “You know, we could probably take this fort for a joyride right now.”

“We can’t,” He laughs, imagining the dishonorable discharge they’d get for stealing military property, serious misconduct and all that.

“No, we cannot.” John chuckles, putting his foot back up on the panel, tipping the column to the side causing the ailerons to move on the wing. He sees this in his periphery and huffs, righting the yoke.

The other watches him do it, that grim smile flattening into something tired. “Why are you here, Buck?”

“Been wanting to talk to you about something.” Clearing his throat, he puts his hands back into his lap to prevent any possible fiddling.

John sits up straight, a frown tugging his eyebrows down and over his eyes. “What is it?”

“It’s about Marge, ah.” He winces as his voice comes out as a croak as he tries regulating his tone to remain unaffected.

“Is it – is it about the letters? Because I can stop, I just-”

“No!” He darts a hand out, gripping John’s wrist. “No. It’s not about that. I know you’ve enjoyed your correspondence, it’s not about that. Promise.”

“What is it then?” John rotates his arm and Buck finds his hand being enveloped in the other’s larger one. Dry and rough, Bucky’s palm is warm against his own clammy grip.

“Wrote Marge after Algeria.” He sucks in a sharp breath, the heat from

where they're touching slowly crawling up his forearm. "Told her I almost didn't make it. Told her that I don't want – that I don't want her to wait for me."

"Gale," John's grip tightens and he sways their hands in the space between the seats.

"It's alright, John. I'm not gutted over it or anything. It's just… it just made sense to end it when I did. After what happened, it made me realize how brief our lives are, how easily extinguished. I wouldn't want her holding out hope for someone who might not even make it back." And it does hurt a little, knowing that he's letting her down. But Marge had still written him and said they could be friends again, that all is not lost.

"But you love Marge, Buck. And she loves you. That's not something to be wasted." John speaks again after a short pause and he sounds like it pains him to say those words.

"I still love her, she's still my family, but I can't be the man that she deserves." He wishes he could explain without sounding like he'd gone crazy. He wishes he could just tell John that he ended things because he knew that if John ever went down on a flight, he'd follow him into the hellfire. That he would follow John anywhere because he needs the other by his side like he's never needed anyone before.

"Just another thing the war's taken from us." John huffs out a humorless laugh that makes Gale's chest ache.

"Such is life, I suppose." He observes as the other's grim expression clears in a matter of moments, replaced by mischief.

"Does this mean you'll finally dance with a skirt next time there's a party?" John teases and he laughs, surprised by the tonal shift.

"Don't count on it."

John tugs on their joined hands, getting up and pulling Gale after him. He stumbles a little, surprised at the motion and they tumble into the body of the Fort. The other leads him to the bomb bay, emptied for now. He finds a flashlight in one of the nooks around the space and turns it on, setting it into the corner facing up.

"How about me, huh?" Bucky finally speaks, tugging him in until he's pressed along John's front. "Gonna dance with me, Buck?"

He swallows heavily, hand flexing in the other's hold and the other coming to rest on John's shoulder. "No music out here."

"Naw, I got us covered, don't worry." John grins and puts a hand on Gale's lower back.

He starts humming, the deep rumble filling up the empty space around them. His humming is better than his singing even though he's a little pitchy still. And the song is – it's *Blue Skies,* of course. John's favorite as he'll tell anyone who'll listen. It's nice, hearing it this close, feeling the other's voice vibrate against his own chest. Bucky sways them in tight circles and Gale lets himself relax.

It feels like this is where they've been heading all along. Every embrace, every shared touch, every long look and every quiet moment between them, it's all lead to this. To dancing with John Egan, the atmosphere intimate and almost sacred. He lies his head on the other's shoulder and closes his eyes. For once, John just smells like cigarettes and aftershave, no overpowering scent of a woman's perfume. It's a good scent, a comfortable one. *Home.*

They loop through the song once, twice and then John stops them, his nose pressed to Gale's forehead. It should be weird, he should feel *wrong* but this is John Egan, *Bucky.* Nothing about being with Bucky could ever feel anything other than right.

"Gale?" John hushes, keeping his voice low. "You fall asleep on me?"

"Just enjoying a peaceful moment," He blinks his eyes open, vision bleary. Bucky's hand comes up to cradle his jaw, pushing him away slightly so that he can look at him. Gale's eyelids flutter at the gentle motion and their gazes meet. He feels languid, like there's liquid heat in his bones as John searches his face for something.

"You really are something else, Buck." The other's grin curls, pearly whites on display.

"That good or bad?" He asks, a little uncertain. He's about to pull back, put some distance between them, but before he can do that, John's hand tightens and that wide smile is being pressed to his in a chaste kiss.

He sucks in a sharp breath as his stomach clenches, fingers spasming where they're gripping at John's shoulder and hand. John's mouth has always fascinated him. It could stretch so wide, say so many things and never falter, it could tic up at the corners to show amusement or

tug down to show displeasure. It was honest in how it flattened when John was thinking, how it shaped the letters of *Gale* or *Buck.* And now, meeting his own in a dry press, he can finally feel it instead of just looking to it for clues.

John pulls back, worrying his teeth over his bottom lip as they stare at each other. He doesn't resist the urge to touch this time, brings up a thumb to pull on it and keep it away from sharp teeth. John's chest expands against his in a heaved inhale.

"Gorgeous," He mumbles when it looks like John's not going to break the silent staring contest. "Gorgeous mouth, Bucky, anybody ever tell you that?"

"N-no, um." The other clears his throat, looking away shyly. "Not really something people notice."

"Their loss." He states firmly. He feels possessed, he feels like the bravest man alive standing there, having just kissed his best friend. And it's odd, considering he hadn't even allowed himself to think about approaching John in this capacity, winced away every time his thoughts strayed too far into inappropriate territory, every time envy shook his core as Bucky spun another girl around the dance floor.

"Buck," John lowers his head again, their noses pressed together. "If anybody's gonna be talking about pretty lips, it should be me."

He feels his cheeks heat at that, at the honest admiration in John's eyes. At how he speaks against said lips.

"Driving me insane with your toothpicks, always taunting, parted so sweetly." It seems as though the other's gotten over his momentary embarrassment and is intent on making Gale lose his mind with his words. So he kisses the other again, if only to shut him up. To stop his own legs from buckling as want rushes into his head and settles behind his eyes.

He groans when John pushes him back until they reach the radio operator's station, until there's a low table under his ass that he can lean on. Bucky fits himself between his knees and Gale hisses as teeth nip at his bottom lip. The brief slip of sound is enough for John's tongue to flick out, fitting into the space newly opened. And he accepts it readily, openly and with fervor.

Bucky devours his mouth like he's drinking him in, like he's the finest whiskey he's ever tasted and Gale feels the kiss in his bones. There's

buzzing in his head, his mind is filled with a litany of *John, John, John* and he's panting as the other whines into his mouth. He'd have thought that kissing a man would feel different, and in some ways, it is – the mustache for one, the ferocity of *being* kissed another – but the motions of it are familiar.

John pulls back so that they can breathe, winded and glossy-eyed and Gale wants to put his mouth on his strong jaw, his neck, his collar bones. So he does. He grips the back of John's head, fingers tangling in regretfully short curls and he wonders if they would grow messier the longer they got, would very much like to see it.

"You're so," John's voice dies in his throat as Gale kisses down the taut line of it, pressing teeth to skin, led by some unknowable instinct that has him wanting to leave marks even though he knows he can't.

"*So* what?" He teases, enjoying how John's hips twitch towards him. He should be nervous, he should feel like this is something monumental, and it is, but. But this is John he's with, if there's anywhere he's comfortable being, it's by John's side. Or rather, in front of him, half-hard and tenting his slacks.

"*Perfect*," John stutters, "Would you accept perfect?"

"And you're so restrained," He shoots back, ignoring how vehemently he wants to deny being anything even close to perfect. "Where's all that bravado gone, darlin'?"

"You're killing me, baby." John throws his head back with a breathy chuckle, hands scrabbling down Gale's front, looking for a weak spot in his outfit, looking to put hands to bare skin.

He reluctantly releases the other's head and moves to help him. They work together to get his uniform unbuttoned, to get his shirt undone and untucked from his pants and then the other's palms are spreading over his abdomen. The contact makes a whine erupt out of him, high in the back of his throat and John grins, smug.

"Wanted to – don't know what to do with you now that I have you here." John admits, fingers digging into yielding flesh, leaving round bruises that he'll prod at later.

"Can do anything you want with me." He taunts and Bucky bares his teeth at him, looking feral in the shadow of the flickering flashlight.

"Oh, that's a dangerous thing to say to someone like me." Bucky purrs

against his cheek, his hands sliding lower to dip his fingertips under the waistband of his pants. “Don’t you know I’m nothin’ but trouble?”

“Course I do,” He kisses the bridge of the other’s nose and moves to the tops of his cheekbones, dragging his mouth over freckled skin. “You’re my trouble, though.”

The moan that leaves John at the declaration will haunt Buck’s dreams for a long while. The other kisses him again, fingers determined to unlatch the buckle of his belt as fast as possible. His cock gives a desperate twitch as the other’s knuckles brush against him and his stomach clenches with anticipation.

“Didn’t think you were the possessive sort, doll.” John drops to his knees in front of him and Buck swears, the heady rush of blood down south making him dizzy with it.

“How can I not be when I know what having you all to myself feels like?” He’s always been honest but this is him letting John under his skin, baring himself naked and asking the other not to do too much damage.

Bucky’s hands open his slacks and tug them down to his thighs. There is a wet spot on his underwear where his need has been obvious. The other’s eyes dart between the trapped hardness and up to Gale’s face, waiting for something – instructions, permission?

He palms the other’s nape and guides him forward. “You want me in your mouth, is that it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky whines, hands coming to grip the backs of his thighs. “Want you in my mouth all the time. Wanna be good.” The other continues nonsensically and Buck snorts, pushing the hair out of the other’s face.

“Go on, then. Show me.” He feels the shudder that goes through the other, feels it like a dose of good medicine after a rough flight. The high of being up in the air. John takes his cock out and wastes no time putting his lips to the crown. He watches, mesmerized, as the tip pearls with murky liquid, as John smears it along the seam of his mouth. It’s a sinfully pleasing sight, something he wants to see over and over again.

He’s only ever had this done to him once before. A fumbled exchange between a couple of high-schoolers, her older than him but still just as unsure. There’s nothing unsure about the way John opens his mouth

and takes his considerable length down his throat like it's nothing. His hips thrust forward automatically and John's mouth adjusts to the intrusion.

He's blinded by the pleasure, by being allowed to do this. By the encouragement in the other's hands as they urge Buck to keep thrusting, to – to *fuck his face.*

"John," He pants, little echoed moans filling the space along with the sloppy sounds of spit and skin. It's obscene, the other's *slurping* around him but there's no shame there. Bucky's enjoying himself and it's obvious with how his eyes roll back every time he's gagged.

"Darlin' – I'm gonna come. So pretty for me, so good. Takin' it all just like that." There's no need for him to put as much drawl in his tone as he praises the other but he can see its effects on John, can see how much he loves it, how affected he is.

"Gonna swallow for me?" He pulls his dick back slightly, until his red tip is resting on the other's tongue. Bucky keeps his mouth open, panting and breathless as Gale fists the length, finishing himself off.

John whines for him again, hand moving up to cup his sac, press lightly behind it, and that little extra contact is enough to tip him over the edge. He spends across the other's tongue, feeds the throbbing length into the other's mouth again and paints the back of the other's throat, too.

"My darling John, my good boy." He purrs as he comes down from his orgasm, petting the other's hair with his clean hand. "Swallow." John does as he's told, throat working obediently and Gale slumps against the table digging into his ass.

"Buck," The other's voice is shot to hell, rough and grating and it has his dick making a valiant effort at getting hard again.

"Come up here, come on." He tugs the other against him, fumbles with the buckle of his belt until he can take the other's girth out. John hisses and Gale spreads his legs so that the other can slot into the groove of his hip.

"Fuck, *fuck."* John pants against his mouth, too distracted with rutting against him like an animal to kiss him properly, thick thighs forcing Gale's own further apart.

"You gonna come on me? Gonna make a mess? If you do, I'll make

you lick it all up." He grins, the feeling of the other being at his mercy coursing through his veins, a certified power trip.

"Treatin' me like a damn dog," Bucky chokes back a laugh, hissing when Gale brings down a hand to help keep him pressed against his overheated skin.

"You sure are panting for it like one." He croons, "Won't you bark for me, John?"

And John does bark, a loud noise making it out of his mouth as he latches his teeth onto the covered ball of Gale's shoulder, conscious of not leaving any marks but wanting to. He feels the other's spend splatter up his stomach, making his undershirt stick to his skin, tacky.

"There we go," He hums, letting John sag against him, bearing the weight of his larger frame.

It's a little uncomfortable, he's getting cold and his undershirt is tacky with the other's release but he doesn't dare disturb John where he's mouthing at his neck, placing gentle pecks there. Eventually, his legs begin to grow numb and he has to pull his underwear and slacks back up, making John shuffle away slightly.

"Hey," The other's smile is sleepy when he finally emerges from where he'd been hiding, hair a hopeless mess that Gale valiantly tries to fix.

"Hey, yourself." He bites at his lip, feeling the embarrassment now that the heat of the moment has passed.

"That was some dance, huh?" John teases and Gale rolls his eyes, tugging him closer to button his pants back up, making him wince.

"Don't make it weird, John." He says, thoughtless and the other freezes. "No that – I mean." He sighs, thumping his head against the other's chest briefly. "It was nice, yes."

"… and if I asked you to dance with me again?" Bucky lowers his head to his own, kissing the top of his head. "Would you like that?"

"You know I would." He affirms, winding his arms under John's until he's hugging him again. "Know I'd dance with you and only you for however long you'd have me as your partner."

And he would. It feels good admitting it, feels like a weight lifted off his shoulders that's he's finally free to say it out loud.

John sucks in a startled breath, squeezing him. “I didn’t know that, actually.”

“You kidding me?” He say just as the flashlight flickers again and dies out, plunging them into the darkness. His tone lowers automatically, as if there is a chance of someone hearing them now that the lights are out. “There hasn’t been anyone other than you in a while. Probably longer than I’d thought.”

“Is this why…” The other trails off and Buck can feel him flinch a little.

“Why I ended things with Marge?” He hums, nodding. “One of the reasons. Another is that… After Regensburg I realized it could be you goin’ down in your Fort next and that my first instinct will always be to make sure you’re alive. If I have to go down with you to do so, then so be it. That was a decent clue.”

“Jesus, Buck. Don’t-” The other tries pulling away but he keeps his hold firm. “Not for me, you can’t.”

“I didn’t say I would. I got men on board that I need to think about. But I’m sayin’ that I would want to. That I’d be tempted to.” He drags his hands down the other’s back until they’re gripping his hips, a mirror of how John had held him earlier.

“For the record, I – I’d do the same.” Bucky hushes, just as reverent. “And, um. I think you should know that maybe Marge knew a little sooner than you’d decided to end it with her.”

He pulls back at that, trying to make out John’s features in the dark. “What?”

“That first letter. She’d hinted that maybe the two of us were… *closer* than was usual for just friends.” John shrugs and waves a hand between them casually. “The words *you two are such loyal friends, almost soul-bound* did make it pretty obvious what she’d thought about it.”

He feels his cheeks heat again, the cooling sweat on the back of his neck making him shiver. “So that’s what that expression was, huh?”

John’s hands come up to cup his face, thumbs running along the soft skin under his eyes. “I’ll show you later.”

“No,” The denial comes easy, this isn’t something he should be privy

to. This is John's business, Marge's words meant for him. "No, you don't need to. Marge has always been observant."

"I was afraid it was only me, that I'd never get to have this, have you. But tonight you – you told me you broke it off and it made sense why, in her last letter, she asked me to take care of you." The other admits and Gale wishes he could see his face, see the way his eyes sparkle.

"Yeah? Think you're up for it, Egan?"

"Oh, doll, we both know you're the one always takin' care of me."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

And he wouldn't. John's a handful. He drinks, he smokes, he gambles but he also laughs so brightly, bursting with life and with energy. He's the stone in Buck's shoe but living without him there wouldn't be living at all. So he'll take care of John when he's needed and trust John to do the same in turn.

End Notes

AND THEN NOTHING BAD HAPPENED EVER
Will i ever write them not slow dancing together? Stay tuned.
Sorry if this is a mess, it was me exploring Buck's POV and yknow it got a little disjointed here and there
I struggled writing this and I think its bc I too am an introvert adopted by yappers but im also different in how i deal with things so there was some weird cognitive dissonance going on
This ended up being Gale 'I can fix him' Cleven the fic in some ways tbh
Would you believe me i originally wanted this to be a pwp abt Gale wanting John to feel him up in public???? Whew imagine that!
Anyway, yall can find me on tumblr and twt @marionettefthjm make sure to check out my other mota fic and ty for reading!

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!